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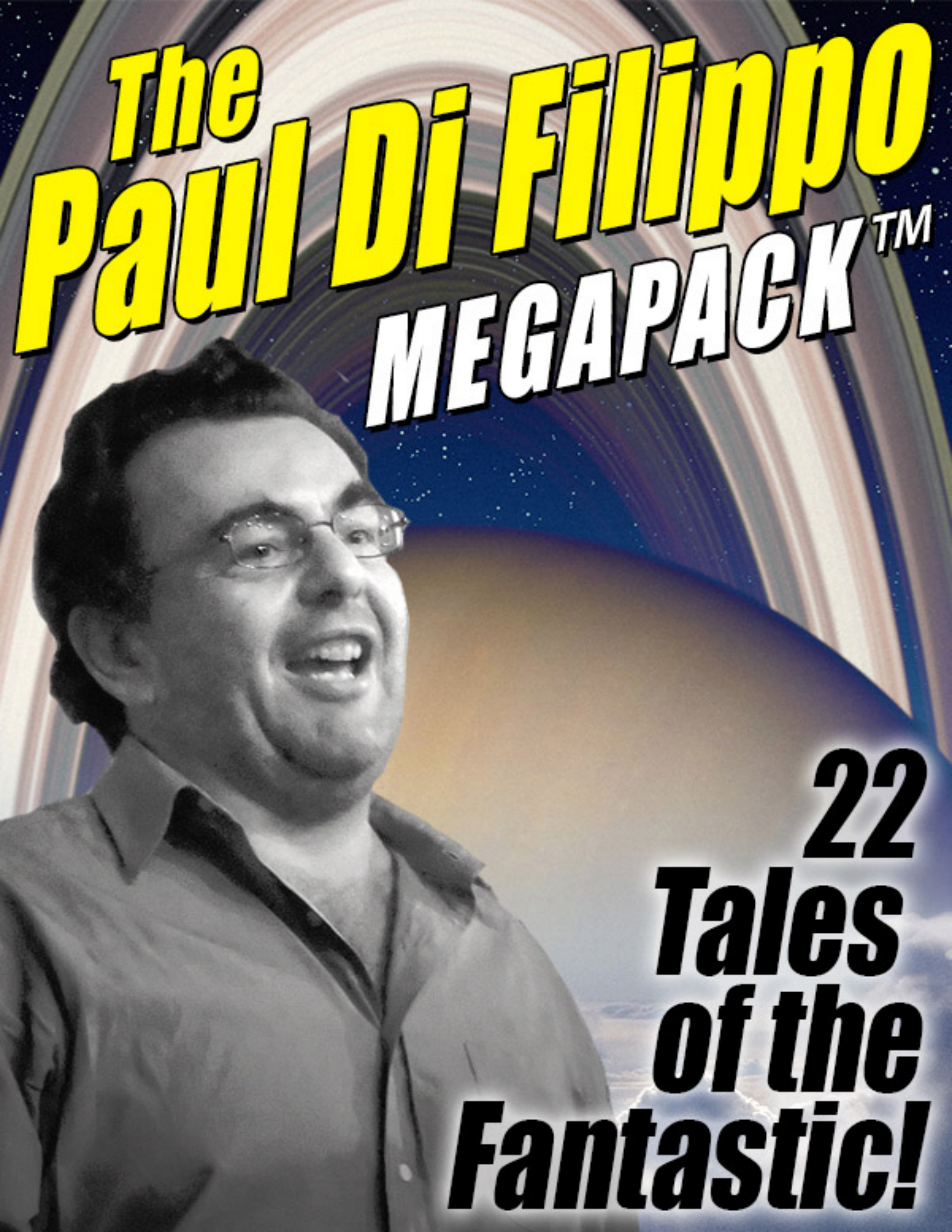

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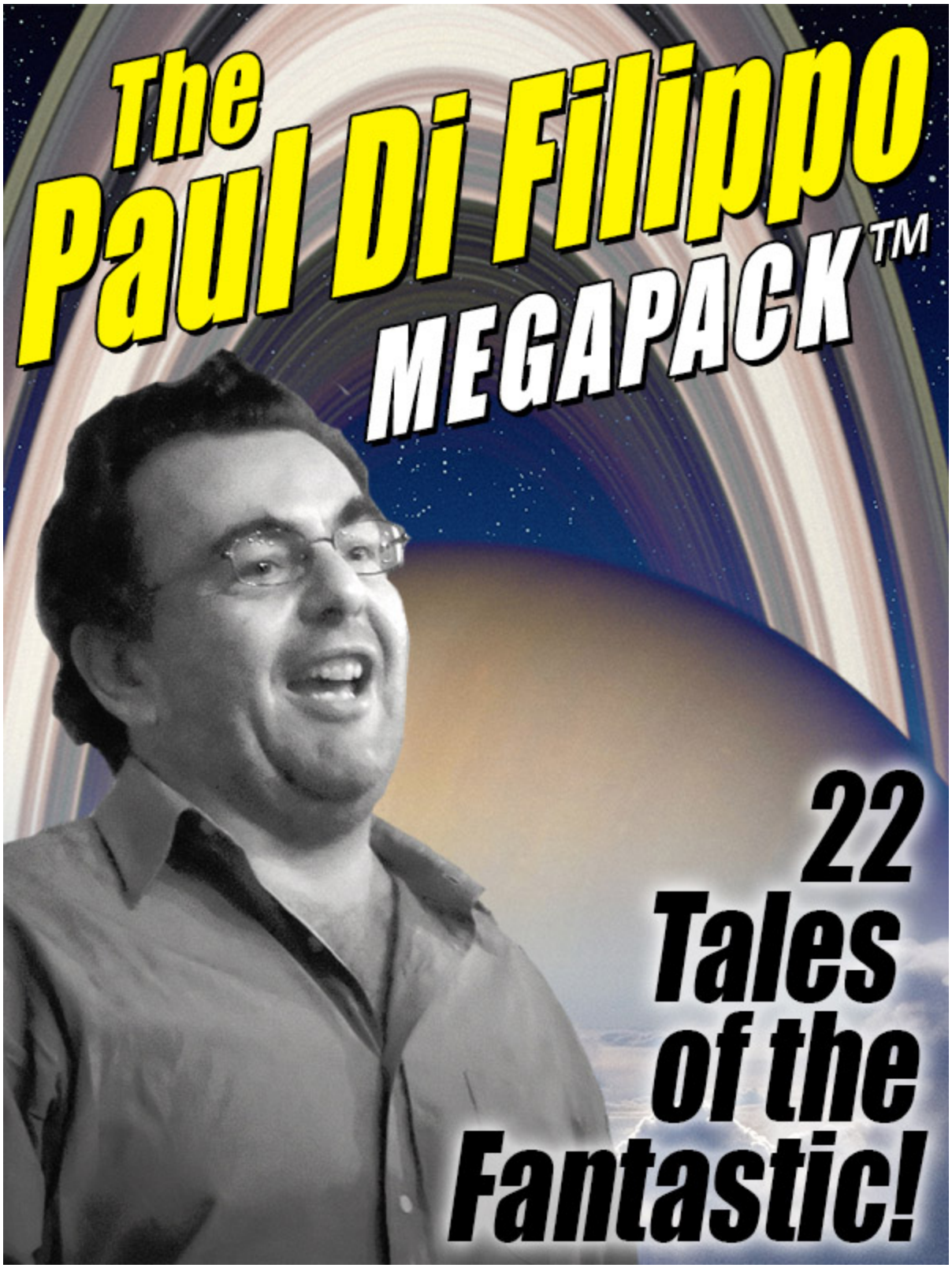
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A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

If you haven't (yet) heard of Paul Di Filippo—well, you've been missing a lot. His tales are wild (some might say "gonzo") and push a lot of boundaries. You never know what to expect, except it's going to be one great ride.

Paul was born in 1954 in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. He has been publishing fiction professionally since the 1970s, releasing a steady stream of great short fiction and novels. (Wildside Press has released several, including *A Mouthful of Tongues*, an erotic SF novel; *Cosmocopia*, an ingenious tale of a drug that can restore creative powers...at a price; and the fantasy *Harp, Pipe, and Symphony*—plus the collection *The Great Jones Coop Ten Gigasoul Party (And Other Lost Celebrations)*.

Paul has personally chosen these stories as a sampler. If you like them—well, for 99 cents you can have these 3 plus a whole lot more in *The Paul Di Filippo MEGAPACK*™.

I'll let you get on with it. (Suggestion: start with the interview.)

Enjoy!

—John Betancourt
Publisher, Wildside Press LLC
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Over the last few years, our MEGAPACK™ ebook series has grown to be our most popular endeavor. (Maybe it helps that we sometimes offer them as premiums to our mailing list!) One question we keep getting asked is, "Who's the editor?"

The MEGAPACK™ ebook series (except where specifically credited) are a group effort. Everyone at Wildside works on them. This includes John Betancourt (me), Carla Coupe, Steve Coupe, Shawn Garrett, Helen McGee, Bonner Menking, Colin Azariah-Kribbs, A.E. Warren, and many of Wildside's authors…who often suggest stories to include (and not just their own!)

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AN INTERVIEW WITH PAUL DI FILIPPO

WILDSIDE: Where are you from originally?

PDF: I was born in Rhode Island, and have lived here all my life. As I turn sixty this year, I realize this strange little state will always be my home. I love New England in general, and somedays think we should secede. We could do at least as well as Texas on her own!

WILDSIDE: Which book or short stories are you most proud of?

PDF: I love all my collections, but I think *Ribofunk* probably does the best job of presenting a coherent future and a sense of style.

WILDSIDE: Is there a writer you idolized growing up?

PDF: I loved so many writers in my youth. I was never one of those readers who forgot who wrote something. I continually scrutinized bylines and looked for more work by my favorites. That early list would include classical stalwarts like Robert Heinlein and Poul anderson and Clifford Simak, to more unconventional folks like J G Ballard, Philip K. Dick, Michael Moorcock and Brian Aldiss.

WILDSIDE: If you could go back in time and meet anyone from history, who would it be?

PDF: Walt Whitman. I'd ask him how he managed to love all of humanity while still recognizing what bastards and idiots we could be.

WILDSIDE: Which current authors do you read?

PDF: As a book reviewer, reviewing nearly 100 books annually, I read a vast range of authors. My tenure as a judge for the Campbell Novel Award brings me into contact with many more. But for sheer pleasure, I turn to vintage mystery novels, by a range of famous and forgotten authors, from William McGivern to Cornell Woolrich.

WILDSIDE: What drives you as a writer?

PDF: The old joke is "Paying the rent!" But that's not totally untrue. Having committed to this career for thirty years now, I am essentially unemployable elsewhere, and so must keep writing to stay fiscally afloat.

But of course, that’s a small percentage of my motivations, which include 1) pleasing readers; 2) pleasing myself; 3) trying to improve my art and my skillset.

WILDSIDE: How can fans best support your work?

PDF: I would love it if some sales could be generated for my new e-books, available from Open Road Media. Also my print backlist is still out there, including some nice volumes from Wildside.

WILDSIDE: Anything you want to add?

PDF: Despite reading works of fantastika for over 50 years now, I remain thrilled and unjaded by the capabilities and potential of the genre. There’s always new miracles ahead of us!

WILDSIDE: Thank you for your time and consideration!

LIFE IN THE CARBYNE AGE

Barnaby Owen was rich by any standards, thanks to his foresighted investments in Mitsubishi's orbital solar power array. So the pleasant prospect of dining out in one of the world's most expensive restaurants, the Sherpa Room atop Mount Everest's summit, just to impress the new woman in his life, did not trouble his e-wallet at all.

Barnaby was meeting with Mitsubishi executives in Tokyo on the morning of March 23, 2044, when Kiana Mance phoned him with her acceptance of his invitation.

"Barn Owl, dearest, I've cancelled my rehearsal for today and tomorrow, just so we can be together tonight."

Kiana was phoning from Rome, where the famous *Cirque de la Lune* was currently getting ready to open their spring season. Kiana's act involved her heavily augmented body in an astonishing routine of aerial gymnastics, culminating in a veritable orgy of aerogel clouds, flying miniature transgenic lions, simulated drone attacks, and a soft landing for her nude form modulated by programmable water jets.

"Wonderful!" said Barnaby with real enthusiasm. Of course, he was sub-vocalizing into his electromyogram mic, while listening to Kiana over his implanted earbuds and enjoying her image on his memtax. Having signalled a break for this important incoming call, Barnaby had tacitly allowed the Japanese executives to agreeably fugue out with their own communications suites.

Thoughts of Kiana's talents being employed in his bedroom sent uncommon thrills down his spine. "Let's see," he said, "it's about five thousand kilometers from Tokyo to Everest, and a bit more for you from Rome. Let's call it fours hours of travel for me and about five for you. I promise you it will be the evening of a lifetime."

Kiana ended the call with air kisses, and Barnaby returned to business.

The nearest Tokyo station for the global hypertube system was moderately busy. But unlike the subways of yore, there was no crowding. Barnaby simply queued up until he reached the head of the line and stepped into a one-person capsule.

"The Sherpa Room, please," Barnaby told the system.

The opaque capsule hermetically sealed itself and was shunted through the airlock interface until it reached the main tube with its partial vacuum, where it was deftly inserted into the traffic stream. Linear induction motors and the capsule's own air compressor took over to accelerate Barnaby to the 1200 KPH cruising speed. The tube entered the sea at Nagasaki, its carbyne walls fully up to the transition and pressures. Stronger than diamond, stronger than its cousin graphene, self-assembling carbyne had made the creation of the worldwide hypertube transit system possible.

During his trip Barnaby worked a bit; amused himself by tinkering with various personal endings for last year's interactive hit, *Justice League XII* (Barnaby identified heavily with Darkseid); and anal-obsessively reconfirmed his room reservation at the hotel that adjoined the Sherpa Room. Already he could picture Kiana sprawled across the bed there. The image prompted him to call her, but her phone was offline. She must be sleeping, he imagined, as her own capsule barrelled across the Reformed Caliphate toward Tibet.

At the scheduled arrival time, Barnaby stepped out into the hypertube station atop Mount Everest. An incredible night-time storm was raging impressively here, nearly nine thousand meters above sea level, but Barnaby and the other patrons were safe behind the terminal's tough walls of microalloy palladium glass.

Barnaby had a drink in the bar while he awaited the arrival of Kiana's capsule. The Sherpa Room and its attached hotel were shaped like a Tibetan vajra: essentially, a huge ornamental barbell.

In a while, Barnaby was rewarded with a solid hug and kiss from the fragrant Kiana, who had stepped out of her capsule fresh and alluring as hothouse turbo-rose. Barnaby knew the evening would be perfect.

And so their romantic experience was, until, midway through their dinner, every patron of the Sherpa Room received the same emergency phone alert.

"Attention! The Tibetan portion of the hypertube network has been subject to a terrorist attack by the sinophile Chamdo Battle Group. They have introduced a carbyne-decohering agent into the system. Quarantine of the affected nodes to prevent global contamination is in effect."

Looking outside the restaurant, Barnaby was horrified to see the hyperloop connection suddenly dissolve into a sluice of black goop that stained the pristine snow and ice.

Used to risking her life nightly at the circus, Kiana was nonetheless disturbed. “Barnaby, the authorities must have a thousand crises to respond to! Supplies here are limited. We can’t just sit forever. How will they ever rescue us?”

Barnaby pondered the situation for a moment. He suddenly recalled the talks at Mitsubishi, about improved payload rates into space. Inspiration struck! Quickly he placed a few calls, then polled the patrons of the Sherpa Room for approval of his plan. A majority endorsed the scheme, and the rich clientele even ponied up enough funds to make the rescue operation self-sufficient.

The guests in the restaurant and hotel, as well as the staff, had plenty of time to secure all the furnishings and to strap themselves in makeshift fashion into comfortable padded chairs. When all the preparations had been made, Barnaby and Kiana sat side by side on a loveseat, gazing up through the glass ceiling.

“There it comes!” shouted several people at once.

The titanic carbyne arm of the repositioned Mitsubishi Skyhook swung through the atmosphere in what seemed a lazy manner, although its tip was travelling at eight kilometer per second.

Barnaby and Kiana found themselves instinctively holding their breath until the Skyhook engaged the barbell’s shaft and lofted the whole pressurized metallic glass structure off its unclamped supports and into space, towards an eventual return to sealevel safety, after a pleasant zero-gee interlude.

The gee-forces were moderate enough to permit Barnaby and Kiana to embrace and kiss.

“I promised you it would be the evening of a lifetime, didn’t I, darling?”

GALAXY OF MIRRORS

Silent and observant, Fayard Avouris clustered with his fellow chattering tourists at the enormous bow-bellied windows constituting the observation deck of the luxury starliner *Melungeon Bride*. Their lazy, leisurely, loafers' ship had just taken up orbit around the uninhabited wilderness world dubbed Youth Regained. Soon the cosseted and high-paying visitors would be ferried down to enjoy such unspoiled natural attractions as the Scintillating Firefalls, the Roving Islands of Lake Vervet, and the Coral Warrens of the Drunken Monkey-mites. Then, before boredom could set in, off to the next stop: the hedonistic casino planet of Rowl.

Contemplating the lovely, patchwork, impasto orb hung against a backdrop of gemlike stars flaring amber, magenta and violet, Fayard Avouris sighed. This trip had failed, so far, either to re-stimulate his sense of wonder or replenish his intellectual pep.

A fellow of medium height and pudgy girth, Avouris did not necessarily resemble the stereotypical professor of anthropology, but neither did he entirely defy such a status. He looked rather too louche and proletarian to be employed as an instructor by such a famous university as the Alavoine Academy of Durwood IV. His style of dress was humble and careless, and his rubicund countenance marked him as a fan more of various weathers than library interiors. But a certain pedantic twist to his lips, and a tendency to drop the most abstruse and aberrant allusions into mundane conversation betrayed his affiliation with the independently thinking classes.

A proud affiliation of many years, which he had routinely cherished up until his nervous breakdown some six months ago.

The unanticipated mental spasm had overtaken Avouris as he lectured a classroom full of graduate students, his remarks also being streamed onto the astromesh for galactic consumption. His theme that day was the explicable exoticism of the several dozen cultures dominant on Hrnd, ranging from the Whitesouls and their recondite taxonomy of sin to the Gongoras and their puzzling paraphilias. As he recounted a particularly spicy anecdote from his field studies among the Gongoras, involving an orgy featuring the massive "walking birds" of the Faraway Steppes, an

anecdote that could always be counted on to hold the audience spellbound, he suddenly felt his own savor for the tale evaporate.

And then his hard-won mental topography of galactic culture instantly flattened.

Ever since his own undergraduate days, Fayard Avouris had painstakingly built up a multidimensional mental map of the hundreds of thousands of human societies and their quirks. Useful as an aide-mémoire, this metaphorical model of the Milky Way's myriad ethnographical topoi resembled a mountain range of human diversity, a splendid chart of mankind's outre customs.

But all of a sudden, his laboriously honed virtual creation deflated to a thin pancake of dull homogeneity.

Whereas previous to this moment Avouris had always seen humans, the only sentients in all the vast galaxy, as creatures exhibiting a practically infinite range of behaviors, suddenly his species seemed to resemble paramecia in their limited repertoire. Like some star collapsing into a black hole and losing all its unique complexion in darkness, all the manifold variations of human behavior born of chance, circumstance and free will now imploded into a kernel of mere instinctual responses to stimuli. Humanity seemed no more than hardwired automatons. Sentience itself, so precious and unique amidst all the organisms in a life-teeming galaxy, appeared more like a curse than a gift. All of humanity's long variegated history appeared bland and predictable.

Avouris slammed to a stop in mid-sentence, and froze in place, hands clamped on the podium. A hastily summoned EMT crew had been required to remove him from behind the lectern.

Alavoine Academy had been very understanding and sympathetic. The tenured holder of the Stridor Chair of Anthropology simply needed a sabbatical; he had been working too hard. A university-sponsored ticket for the next cruise of the *Melungeon Bride* would solve everything. He'd return invigorated and in top-notch mental health.

But now, three planets into the cruise, as Fayard Avouris contemplated more sight-seeing—this time, thankfully, on a world devoid of humans—any such recovery seemed increasingly problematical. The matter of how he could ever reawaken his quondam fascination with the antics of his race plagued him. Moreover, he had begun to suspect that his own dalliance with

neurosis was not unique—that this affliction was becoming widespread, and that his own anticipatory bout with it reflected merely a greater sensitivity to the zeitgeist.

On this cruise, Avouris had discreetly probed his fellow passengers, seeking to ascertain their level of excitement regarding their itinerary. The first three stops had occurred at worlds that boasted supremely exotic cultures that deviated far from the galactic norm, a consensual baseline of behaviors continually updated by astromesh polling.

On the world known as Karoshi, people vied to perform the most odious jobs possible in order to attain the highest social status. The most admired and rewarded citizens, virtual royalty, were those who applied medicinal salves to the sores of plague victims via their tongues.

On Weebo III, exogamy was enforced to the exact degree that no two citizens could enjoy intercourse unless a different stranger was invited into the affair each time.

And on Tugnath, a booming trade in afterlife communications involved the perilous enactment of near-death experiences among the interlocutors.

And here they were now at the edenic Youth Regained, afterwards to be visiting Rowl, Lyrely, Ahab's Folly, Zizzofizz and Port Canker. Surely, an itinerary to feed a lifetime of vibrant memories.

And yet Avouris's companions manifested little real excitement. They seemed bored or apathetic, no matter how bizarre their encounters with oddball races. Why? Not because they were all jaded cosmopolites; many of the travelers aboard the *Melungeon Bride* were entirely new to starfaring. No, the only explanation that Avouris could sustain involved immunization to the limited ideational space of human customs and beliefs.

No matter how strange a culture looked initially, upon closer contemplation it became merely one more predictable example of a general class of human behaviors. Death, sex, piety, hedonism, sports, procreative ardor, fashion sense, artistic accomplishment—these few motivators, along with a couple of others, constituted the entire range of determinants for human culture. True, the factors could be combined and permuted in a large number of ways. But in the end, a discerning or even a naïve eye could always unriddle the basic forces at work.

This sense of a limited ideational space constraining the potentials of the species was what had brought Avouris down with a crash. And he suspected

that some of the same malaise was beginning to afflict the general populace as well, a millennia into the complete expansion of humanity into the peerless galaxy.

If only other modalities of sentience had presented themselves! Mankind could have had various educational windows to look through, rather than an endless hall of mirrors. But galactic evolution had been cruel and parsimonious with regards to intelligence…

Flatscreens across the observation deck and on various personal devices came to life with the voice and face of Slick Willywacker, the ship's obnoxious tummler. Fayard Avouris experienced a crawling dislike for the clownish fellow.

"Hey-nonny-nay, sirs and sirettes! Prepare to embark for a glamorous groundling's go-round! We'll be loading the lighters with the guests from cabins A100 through A500 first. Meanwhile, have a gander at these little imps cavorting in realtime down below!"

The screens filled with Drunken Monkey-mites at play in the surf. The tiny agile beings seemed beguilingly human, but Avouris knew that they were in reality no smarter than a terrestrial gecko.

Sighing deeply, Avouris turned toward the exit. Perhaps he'd just sit at the bar and drink all day…

Startled exclamations and shrieks caused the anthropologist to whirl around and face the windows again.

In the moment of turning his back upon Youth Regained, the planet had changed radically.

Where before empty plains and coasts and mountain ranges had loomed, there now reared vast conurbations, plainly artificial in nature. From this low-orbit vantage, Avouris could even make out extensive agricultural patternings.

Avouris inquired of a stranger. "What happened?"

The elderly woman replied in a dazed fashion. "I don't know. I just blinked, and life was altered!"

The screens had gone blank during this inexplicable and impossible transition. But now they flared back to life.

A single Drunken Monkey-mite face dominated each display. But this creature resembled the little imps of a minute past only insofar as a lemur

resembled a human. This evolved being wore clothing, and stood in a room full of alien devices.

The Monkey-mite spoke in perfect astromesh-standard Galglot.

“Hello, ship in orbit. Who are you? Where do you come from? We have never had visitors before!”

Fayard Avouris felt a big smile crease his face.

Life had suddenly become vitally interesting again.

* * * *

The stark and cheerless offices of the Okhranka on Muntjac in the Al’queem system had not been designed to coddle visitors. Generally speaking, the only types who visited the Okhranka willingly and via the public entrance were vendors of spyware and concealed weaponry; informers either vengeful or altruistic; errant politicians being called out to correct their views; and kooks with sundry theories regarding infernal dangers and utopian opportunities.

Fayard Avouris knew without a doubt that the officials of the galactic security apparatus would certainly place him in the last-named category. An academic from a small institution, however respectable, purporting to hold unique insights regarding the biggest conundrum of recorded history, a puzzle which had kept all the best minds of the galaxy stymied for the past six months— Well, how else could he appear to them, other than as one of those eccentric amateurs who claimed to hold the answer to the fabled disappearance of the *Pitchforth Lady*, or the key to the unbreakable ciphers of the Neo-Essenes?

Knowing how he must appear to these bureaucrats, who were probably observing him in secret even now, Avouris strove to maintain his dignity, composure and respectability, even as he tallied his third excruciating hour of waiting in this uncomfortable chair. For the twentieth time he paged through a hardcopy leaflet entitled *A Field Agent’s Best Practices for Intra-urban Rumor Quelling* without seeing a word of the text, all the while revolving in his mind the most compelling way to deliver his pitch.

Ever since making his discovery some five weeks ago, Avouris had striven to reach someone in the government who would pay heed to his findings. After many futile entreaties, this appointment with a mid-level apparatchik had been the best meeting he could secure. He wondered now

what I. G. Narozhylenko would look like, how receptive he would be. Avouris had tried searching the astromesh for details of the man, but as an Okhranka functionary, the fellow was almost nonexistent so far as public records went. Avouris hoped he would be neither too apathetic nor too closed-minded to listen to an unconventional theory.

Just as the anthropologist was about to peruse the old leaflet for the twenty-third time an inner door opened, and Narozhylenko's personal assistant appeared. Avouris instinctively admired the young woman's grace and shape and modest yet stylish fashion sense. Short hair the color of a raven's wing, arrayed in bangs across an intelligent forehead, nicely framed alert, inquisitive features.

"You may enter now, Professor Avouris."

Inside the office, Avouris dropped down into a guest chair microscopically more comfortable than his previous seat. To his astonishment, the woman took up a desk chair on the far side of a nameplate scribed AGENT I. G. NAROZHYLENKO.

"You are I. G. Narozhylenko?"

"Yes, Ina Glinka Narozhylenko." The woman smiled wryly. "You had a pre-formed conception of me at variance with reality?"

"No, of course not! That is, I—" Avouris gave up apologies and explanations as a waste of time. Luckily, Narozhylenko did not seem put out, or inclined to pursue the embarrassing matter. Indeed, Avouris seemed to detect a small smile threatening to escape bureaucratic suppression.

"Let's get right to your business then, Professor. I won't apologize for keeping you waiting so long. As you might imagine, our agency has been stressed beyond belief in dealing with the advent of these non-human sophonts. Not only must we manage the pressing practical issues involved in fitting them into galactic culture, but the implications of their instant creation carry even more disturbing challenges. The past six months have overturned so many paradigms that we can barely get our heads above the wreckage. Galactic culture is churning like a Standeven milkmaid on the eve of the springtime butter-sculpting festival."

Avouris appreciated the clever metaphor. It seemed to bespeak learning, humor and broad-mindedness: three qualities he could appeal to in his pitch.

“I agree absolutely. Out of nowhere, our age has become a revolutionary era.”

The miraculous and instantaneous transformation of Youth Regained from a wilderness planet into the seemingly long-established homeworld of the first non-human civilization ever encountered had been merely the opening note in a bizarre symphony of spontaneous generation.

Shortly thereafter, the world known as Pronk-Kissle had instantly flipped from uninhabited desert wastes to the thriving techno-hives of giant talking sand fleas.

Voynet VII suddenly sported a global culture of stratospheric sentient gasbags.

Spaethmire now hosted a single group intelligence distributed across billions of individuals resembling both sessile and mobile slime molds.

Los Caminos now featured continental-spanning burrows populated by sensitive and poetical beings who resembled naked mole-rats crossbred with whales, each one large as a subway car.

And so on, for another two dozen transformed worlds scattered across the formerly humans-only galaxy, with fresh instances occuring at regular intervals.

All these new alien civilizations had just two things in common.

They all claimed to have arisen naturally over geological timespans on their native planets.

None of them had ever encountered humans before.

These mutually exclusive assertions—each tenet impossible in its own way, given humanity’s long acquaintance with these worlds—had engendered scores of theories, none of which had yet been proven to represent the truth of the matter.

Ina Glinka Narozhylenko regarded Avouris sternly. “You’re not here to tell me you have the answer to these manifestations, are you, Professor? Because I do not believe that your field of expertise—anthropology, is it not?—could feature insights unavailable to our best quantum physicists and plectic fabulists.”

Momentarily distracted by the deep grey eyes of the attractive Okhranka agent, Fayard Avouris hesitated a moment before saying, “Oh, no, Agent Narozhylenko, I don’t pretend to know the origins of these aliens. However,

I do believe that I can predict with some degree of accuracy where the next such outbreak will occur."

Narozhylenko leaned forward intently. "You have exactly fifteen minutes to justify this bold assertion, Professor."

"I have here a memory stick. If you would be so kind as to plug it into your system, Agent Narozhylenko…."

The woman did so.

On a large screen popped up a navigable simulucrum of the galaxy. Avouris rose to stand beside the screen where he could interact with the display.

"Here are the recorded outbreaks." The map zoomed and shrank across several scales, as Avouris called up the locations of the alien worlds as he had plotted them earlier. "Do you see any pattern to their distribution?"

"No. And neither did any of several thousand experts."

"Ah, but that is because you do not have a solid theory that would allow you to examine and compare the relevant data sets."

Avouris went on to explain about his personal disllusionment, his dismal anti-epiphany regarding human limitations and sameness, and how he believed that such a malaise was now a general, albeit unrecognized condition across the galaxy.

"I call this spiritual ailment 'Mirror Sickness.' Perhaps you've seen symptoms of it around you, or even in yourself…?"

Agent Narozhylenko sat pensive. "Yes…yes… I recognize the feeling. Proceed with your presentation."

"I have spent hundreds of hours since the first alien incursion performing astromesh polling across thousands of worlds on the phenomenon of Mirror Sickness." The screen came alive with animated histograms. "Sifting the results involved the employment of a number of expert machine systems, or I would not have finished for years. In any case, here is a map of the neurosis, graded by severity of symptoms."

Avouris overlaid his findings atop the display of alien outbreaks.

Agent Narozhylenko rose slowly to her feet. "They match… They match exactly! Aliens are appearing at equidistant loci relative to those humans worlds most despairing of the limitations of our species."

"Let's call them 'the loneliest worlds,' for convenience's sake. And you'll note that the manifestations are precisely encoding the severity gradient of

Mirror Sickness, from worst case downward."

Narozhylenko approached the screen and magnified a sector of the galactic map. "Wustner's Weatherbolt should display the next outbreak then. In just a week's time." She turned to Avouris. "Are you currently free from teaching duties, Professor Avouris."

"Now, and perhaps for the rest of my life!"

* * * *

Agent Ina Glinka Narozhylenko manifested superior piloting abilities at the helm of her little space clipper, the Okhranka-supplied *Whispering Shade*. Fayard Avouris felt utterly safe in her hands, although her extremely speedy and cavalier passage through the Oort Cloud on the extremes of the Sockeye star system where the world called Wustner's Weatherbolt revolved had induced a little transient anxiety in the anthropologist.

But now, as the homely little ship floated serenely and safely above the rondure of the planet where—if Avouris's theory and calculations were correct—a miraculous transformation from nescient virgin mudball to home of another unprecedented alien civilization was about to occur, Avouris could not fully relax. Unable to quell a griping sense of injustice, he felt compelled to speak.

"I still can't believe that you and I were deputed alone to affirm my theory. Are your superiors insane or merely mingy, that they could not devote more resources than this to such a potentially lucrative information-gathering expedition? Where is the vast armada of research vessels that should have accompanied us?"

Across the cabin from where Avouris sat, Agent Narozhylenko fussed with the craft's small food reconstituter, preparing a meal. Avouris admired her efficient, graceful movements. He only wished the woman would open up and discuss personal matters with him. The social ambiance during their journey of three days had been rather more arid and formalistic than Avouris could have wished. But so far, Agent Ina Glinka Narozhylenko had maintained a scrupulously business-like demeanor. After his one attempt to call her by her given names and to probe into her familial background had been met with silence and a frosty stare and the subliminal threat of esoteric martial- arts dissuasions, he had refrained from any further pleasantries. So now all he could do by way of conversation was complain.

“The Okhranka Directorate,” said the agent in response to his gripe, “are not fools or gamblers. And their resources are always limited, never more so than at present. Oftentimes only a single agent is tasked with a complex assignment. We are highly competent and trained across a broad number of surprising disciplines. The *Whispering Shade* boasts all the sensors of a larger craft, so more vessels would be superfluous. And the satellites I’ve launched give us complete telemetric coverage of the planet. Believe me, if we witness the fulfillment of your prediction, the next such occasion will merit a fuller contingent.”

Avouris grumped before responding. “Well, I suppose you people know what you’re doing.”

Narozhylenko cocked one eyebrow. “A very generous allowance on your part, Professor Avouris. Now, would you care for some shabara fillets?”

After eating they rested in their separate berths, under a programmed bout of artificial sleep. The guardian machines triggered wakefulness well in advance of the projected time for the planetary transition. Then commenced the nerve-wracking waiting.

“What do you see as the probable cause of these eruptions of nonhuman sentience, Professor?” Narozhylenko asked, while she fiddled with the satellites’ feed. “Of the theories so far proposed, I place Planck-level punctuated equilibrium first, global de-masking of long-established hidden worlds second, and mass mind-tampering third.”

Avouris shook his head thoughtfully. “No, no, none of those explanations appeal to me as sufficiently comprehensive. Whatever the answer, it will be more complex than any scenario so far advanced. And then we have the question of motive. I can’t believe this is a natural phenomenon. A prime mover is implied. Who, and why? And why now?”

“Perhaps your own theories about the spatial distribution of the changes will contribute to an ultimate solution, Professor.”

“So I hope. Now, let us focus on these screens. The change is imminent, I believe.”

Agent Narozhylenko moved to magnify the image of Wustner’s Weatherbolt on one display, but even as she did so the planet vanished, to be replaced by an edgeless curving wall bristling with dangerous-looking protrusions.

Avouris could merely gasp, and say, “What the—?” before Narozhylenko had moved to step down the scale of the display.

Interposed between the *Whispering Shade* and the altered planet was a space-going vessel that had appeared from nowhere. So enormous as to render the Okhranka ship a pea next to a prize-winning pumpkin, the alien craft radiated martial prowess and a defiant hostility.

Narozhylenko’s frantic fingers found an active communications channel.

A separate panel showed a being that resembled a bipedal lobster colored fungal white. Its stubby midriff legs wiggled angrily. It occupied a command center bustling with others of its kind.

Avouris had time only to say, “That’s plainly an evolved form of the Ghost Crawdad of Miravalle Caverns.” Then the lobster was speaking.

“You are friends of the World Thinker, or enemies?”

“Who is the World Thinker?” asked Narozhylenko.

“Wrong answer. Now you must die.”

A coruscating sphere of blue-gold energy bloomed from the ship of the Ghost Crawdads, but the *Whispering Shade* was already curving and jinking away. The ball of destruction missed them and decohered violently but uselessly, flooding space with radiation. On the communications channel, the lobster captain gestured silently with his antennae, audio transmissions temporarily suspended at Narozhylenko’s behest.

Sweating yet composed, Narozhylenko said, “We have to get well beyond the mass of the planet before I dare kick in the superposition drive! Even then it’s extremely dangerous. Stall these angry arthropods somehow! Go!”

She flicked the audio back on, and Avouris began to babble.

“Sweet saltworms to you, my hardshell friends! May all your mates molt most enticingly! You mistake us for enemies! We are not! This World Thinker you mention is unknown to us. Please enlighten us poor, exsoskeleton-bereft, leg-deficient beings.”

The lobster captain made no reply, but evidently shut off his own audio to consult with his officers. Narozhylenko evoked a tithe of additional power from the *Shade*’s engines. Avouris felt his own shirt pasted to his wet armpits.

“That’s it, keep it up! Just another five minutes….”

The lobster’s idiosyncratic but intelligible Galglot resumed. “You must know the World Thinker, source of all intelligence. His gift is a poisoned

one, though. Admit it! Don’t you wish his destruction, impossible as that might be?”

“Oh, of course! Death to all World Thinkers! Free the sentients!”

The lobster captain performed what could only be interpreted as a disdainful arthropodic glare. “Your protestations are insufficiently sincere. Goodbye.”

Several more deadly rosettes of energy bloomed, converging rapidly and ineluctably on the human ship, just as Narozhylenko shouted, “Now!”

The *Whispering Shade* juddered, leaped, its metal bones ringing with one tremendous *bong!*, then settled down into easy superposition travel outside the relativistic universe.

Agent Narozhylenko jumped up from the controls and flung herself at Fayard Avouris. He hardly knew how to react, half-expecting chastising corporal punishment for his diplomatic incompetence. But the agent’s kisses and caresses soon allayed that fear. Avouris returned them heartily.

In the interstices, the anthropologist whispered, “Oh, Ina Glinka….”

“No,” she whispered lusciously, “call me Rosy….”

* * * *

The armada amassed around Wangba-Szypyt IX would have caused the Ghost Crawdads to shed their tails and flee. The Okhranka Directorate were taking no chances on the arrival of another belligerent space-faring set of aliens. The human ships were porcupined with weaponry.

On the command deck of the lead cruiser, Rosy and Fayard occupied a rare position of civilian perquisite. Agent Narozhylenko was discussing tactics with a dour silver-haired soldier named Admiral Leppo Brice, while Avouris speculated with a team of academics about which species native to Wangba-Szypyt IX would be the candidate for uplift by the mysterious World Thinker.

“I like the odds on the Golden Dog-Snails. They already exhibit complex herd behaviors….”

After their safe return from the Sockeye system, Rosy and Fayard had been throughly debriefed by the Okhranka. The telemetric records of their encounter with the Ghost Crawdads and the transformation of their planet had proven illuminating. Physicists were still analyzing the instantaneous phase-change the planet had undergone, but no final theories about the

methodologies or technics employed by the enigmatic prime mover referenced by the Ghost Crawdads was forthcoming as yet. Of course, researches among the other, more placid alien races also continued apace.

The success of Fayard's prediction and the strategic resourcefulness of Agent Narozhylenko naturally ensured that both would be invited to witness the next eruption of sentience.

As for their personal affairs—well, Fayard often caught himself whistling tunelessly and wearing the broadest of grins. All his old anomie derived from Mirror Sickness had been disspelled like mist before a tornado. Such was the power of Rosy's affections.

Additionally, Mirror Sickness itself seemed to be abating as a cultural wavefront. The arrival of these new sophonts into the formerly homogenous galactic milieu was having a stimulating positive effect.

Avouris had taken this change into account in his calculations, redoing his astromesh polling to reflect the changed gradients of Mirror Sickness. His old predictions, in fact, had nominated the world of Bricklebank as the next candidate for change after Wustner's Weatherbolt. But the new dynamics had brought them here instead.

And now the predicted moment was nearly at hand.

Hemmed in by taut-nerved military personnel, Fayard and Rosy intently observed the big screen dominated by a view of the mottled sapphire that was Wangba-Szypyt IX.

The anticipated moment came—

—passed—

—and passed again, with no evident change.

Admiral Brice demanded, "Status groundside!"

"No alterations, sir!"

Avouris began to feel sick. "What of Bricklebank?"

The communications officer reported no relevant news from that world, then hesitated at fresh data.

"Admiral Brice, a mining colony in the Furbini system reports an uplift outbreak there!"

"Belligerents?"

"No, sir. The new aliens appear to be vegetative in origin."

A grim-faced Rosy clasped the hand of her lover in support. His voice weakly solicitous, Fayard Avouris contributed: "That would probably be the

Hardaway Pitcher Plants. They already employ their vines like tentacles….”

Admiral Brice glared at the hapless anthropologist. “Luckily, Professor, your incompetence has resulted in no harm to any innocents.”

“I assure you, Admiral, the next time—”

But the next predicted occurrence likewise failed to meet Avouris’s specifications.

And after that, his services were no longer valued at a premium.

* * * *

What damnable factor had thrown off his careful plot of the contingent uplift instances? Avouris sensed that the errors were down to a faulty map of the Mirror Sickness. But his polling techniques and data-mining were watertight, as evidenced by his success at Wustner’s Weatherbolt.

Therefore, he must be getting bad inputs. Could some cultural force manifesting only in the portion of the galaxy currently under examination be responsible?

Avouris began a mental tour of his restored virtual topography of human culture.

The Leatherheads of Xyella would speak truth only to fellow clansmen, but his polling of them had enlisted such informers.

The Mudmen of Bitterfields offered the reverse of what they believed. A transparent fix.

The Pingpanks of Stellwagen V radically modified all their speech with a complex vocabulary of mudras. Trivial to interpolate those gestures.

The Perciasepians of Troutfalls—

Some trained intuition made Avouris re-examine what he knew about this culture.

Six months ago, unknown to an otherwise preoccupied Avouris, a prophet named Hardesty had manifested among the Perciasepians. Hardesty’s rubric? Simplicity itself!

Optimism triumphed reality!

Archived news reports revealed that the faddish ethos had spread like a plague, to the point that no Perciasepian nowadays would ever admit to any despair.

Here was the blot in his calculations! The Perciasepians had denied any Mirror Sickness among them.

Hastily, Avouris took his Perciasepian datapoints from half a year ago, prior to Hardesty's advent, added in some compensatory factors, and reformulated his maps.

Eureka!

The office of Ina Glinka Narozhylenko had never witnessed such an intemperate visitor. Bursting into Rosy's inner sanctum, Avouris found the agent occupied with the minor and semi-humiliating tasks she had been assigned since the debacle of sponsoring Avouris.

"Bofoellesskaber! Bofoelleskaber!"

"Fayard, please. What does that nonsense mean?"

"It's the place where the next uplift outbreak will happen! You've got to tell the Directorate!"

"They want no part of you or me."

"Then we'll just have to go alone to prove we're right."

"I cannot secure a ship from the Okhranka this time."

"We'll rent one! What good are my savings now? Are you with me?"

Rosy sighed. "Who would take care of you otherwise?"

* * * *

Once more, Rosy kicked at a plant resembling a green hassock. The vegetable furniture emitted a squeak from its punctured bladders, and collapsed fractionally into itself.

"Damn that cheating shipyard! And damn me for trusting them!"

Sitting on another living ottoman, Fayard nursed his contusions and sighed. "Please, Rosy, no more self-recriminations. Your skills are the only reason we are still alive."

Some yards distant, the crumpled hulk of an old Pryton's Nebulaskimmer still exuded vital fluids into the lush turf of Bofoellesskaber, at the terminus of a mile-long gouge in the planet's rich soil. The rental craft would never journey from star to star again.

Rosy plopped down beside Fayard. "Granted. But I should have done a better pre-flight inspection. It's just that we were in such a hurry—"

"My fault entirely. But look at the bright side. We're unharmed for the moment. When the uplift happens, chances are good that the new aliens will be benevolent. Their presence will register on the Directorate's desktop, an expedition will arrive, and we'll soon be safely home."

“I suppose….”

“Let’s brace ourselves now. We can expect the change soon.”

Fayard and Rosy hugged each other as they tried to anticipate what the uplift experience would feel like from planetside. Would the unknown phenomenon have any effect on their own constitutions? Might they be mutated in fast-forward fashion?

A subliminal shiver like the kiss of a ghost resonated through them. The moment must have come! But outwardly, nothing had changed.

“We must be distant from any new alien settlement on this world…,” ventured Avouris.

“Fayard, look!”

Rosy was pointing skyward.

Bofoellesskaber’s single sun had been replaced by three.

A voice spoke in their heads: *Welcome to your future. I am the World Thinker, humanity’s final heir.*

* * * *

As the World Thinker patiently explained things to his accidental visitors, his work was practically child’s play, here in a period some two billion years removed from Fayard and Rosy’s time.

Viewing the past and selecting a planet with the best potential for uplift, and in a galactic location where it would subsequently do the most good to mitigate Mirror Sickness, this demiurge would abstract the world entire from its native era. Brought forward to the far future and installed in this artificial star system whose three suns could be modulated to provide just the right spectrum that would mimic the original stellar environment, the world was ready for development.

The World Thinker next approached the species chosen for uplift treatment, tinkered with its genome to foster sentience, and then simply allowed Darwinian evolution to take its course over a few hundred or thousand millennia. No acceleration necessary. The alien culture would develop naturally in situ. When judged ripe, the whole world would be translated back to Fayard and Rosy’s era without more than a single unit of Planck time having ticked by in the eyes of the human observers in the past, thus making a whole race appear to arise instantaneously out of nowhere.

“But why?” asked Avouris. Despite receiving no visible sign of the World Thinker, Fayard had conceived an image of the being from its mental projections, an image which consorted nicely with a fussy old neurotic and knowledge-heavy librarian from his own undergraduate days.

A note of resigned sadness filtered into the World Thinker’s speech. *To render myself non-existent*.

The native timeline known to the World Thinker had never exhibited any sentience save humanity. The cosmic human civilization had succumbed to wave after wave of Mirror Sickness, resulting in myriad ugly apocalyptic crashes and warped resurgences, an endless cycle of inbred frustration and soul miasma that had culminated in the World Thinker’s own lonely damaged birth at the end of human history.

I am an imperfect thing, half mad and so much less than I could have been. I bear within me the entire record of humanity’s bitter isolation. But it occurred to me that I could remake the past, to engender a better scenario. So I chose your era as the pivotal moment to install change, and began to seed it with alien sentience.

Rosy interrupted. “But if you still exist, then your plan did not work. Your seeding occurred two billion years ago, and yet you remain. You should have vanished instantly upon first conceiving of your scheme.”

A faint sense of laughter seemed to permeate the next words of the World Thinker.

But then how would the scheme ever have been carried out to result in my vanishing? No, the chronal paradoxes are unresolved. Am I operating across multiple timelines, living in one and tinkering with another, or do all my actions occur only in one strand of the multiverse? Maybe I am improving the continuum nextdoor to mine. Is that yours, or not? In any case, I have no choice but to continue. Humanity cannot develop in a healthy manner without alien peers. I am testament to that premise.

The three suns of Bofoellesskaber were now setting, and the air grew chill. Fayard and Rosy held each other more tightly.

“What’s to become of us?” Avouris asked.

Your presence will allow me to fulfill one last seeding, the most crucial of all. Don’t worry: I will visit you from time to time with aid.

Realization struck Avouris like a blow. “Surely such a sophisticated entity as yourself will not endorse such a cliché!”

No reply was forthcoming. Instantly their surroundings had altered.

The air, the light, the smells, the sounds—all possessed a primeval rightness, an ancestral gravity.

Rosy laughed with a touch of grimness. “Earth! Would you care to guess the date?”

Avouris sighed, then chuckled. “Far enough back, my dear, that there will be no constraints on our family size whatsoever, I imagine.”

SPECTER-BOMBING THE BEER GOGGLES

Firpo Manzello was looking to get lucky. He hadn’t had sex in three weeks, and was beginning to fear he never would again. Yotta-toxic, serkku!

Part of the carnal drought involved Firpo’s job. He worked for the city of Cambridge, Massachusetts, in their Public Works Department, Sewer Division, Rogue Transgenic Squad. Firpo’s job involved descending into the subterranean labyrinth of utility tunnels with his team each morning and cleaning up whatever escaped the filters and traps of the numerous biotech plants in the city. Most days, the team’s quarry was nothing more challenging than some errant slime mold or motile vat-cortex. But from time to time, more complex organisms got loose. Firpo still bore crosshatched scars on his ankles and calves from tangling with a pride of anomalocaris. Believe me, serkku, those things could bite! What the hell had the fabbers been thinking when they endowed the monster shrimps with that pincer equipment? Lots of good eating there in the grabbers, but still—

Firpo’s job description itself wasn’t the actual problem. Some women actually found his duties sexy. Great White Hunter/Urban Superhero Guardian and all that. No, the hard nut was how Firpo smelled after a day at work. Heavy aromatics in those sewers! Even industrial-strength odor-remediation ribozymes from TraumaTech failed to eliminate every molecule of stench. Hard to get close to a babe when you reeked even faintly of seaweed-fermenting yeast strains.

But a liberal dose of Hack’s Bodyspray could generally mask Firpo’s signature smell at least long enough for him to make a love connection. The other, greater part of his problem was his erotic selectivity.

Firpo had developed a kink, hardwired now in his neurons by way, way too much gameplay in the online universe of ElfQuest. (A geezer at age twenty-eight, Firpo had prefered the old-fashioned platform over the augmented reality live-action version.) SAD, the experts called Firpo’s kink. Sympathetic Avatar Dysmorphia, brought on by excessive somatic identification with one’s virtual self and peers. Although he managed to kick his gamer addiction, he could only get turned on by women who looked like elves. Needless to say, such real-life women were a tiny

minority on the dating scene. True, there was a small community of modded and cosplay elves at MIT. But Firpo had kinda aged out of that scene, and dramatically burned some bridges.

That left him only one choice really if he wanted to get laid.

He was going to have to download the Beer Goggles app.

The Beer Goggles app was a piece of augmented reality software that ran on your memtax. It changed the user's visual perception of other humans, overlaying onto them whatever physical parameters the user dictated. Beer Goggles would allow Firpo to perceive every woman as an elf. Or so he had been assured by the vendor's sales pitch. He had not actually used the app yet. Before today, the thought of downloading it into his phone felt too much like defeat, giving in to his neurosis and carrying around a talisman of his deviance. He kept telling himself that he could beat his kink and get normal. But three celibate weeks had proved he was too weak to defeat his kink.

So, eager to be loved again, Firpo took the decisive step.

First he popped in a new pair of memtax. The brief interval when his naked eyes beheld the world, when unmediated photons struck his rods and cones, seemed weird and incomplete, as if he had been stripped of one of his senses.

Memtax were living contact lenses built out of jellyfish proteins laced with graphene circuitry and an RGB chromatophore micromatrix. They subsisted by drinking the wearer's tears, lasted forty-eight hours, and a year's supply came free with most annual phone contracts. Possessing only minimal memory and processing power (about as much as turn of the century PC), they had just one function: painting the user's retinas with high-res realtime imagery. Oh, yeah: their outward-facing side replicated the user's iris and pupil—or any other image the user chose.

The memtax were übertoothed to Firpo's phone, which in turn rode the cognitive E3 cellular network to the vast global cloud.

After losing his expensive smartphone several times in the sewers, even when secured in a supposedly failsafe holster, Firpo had invested in a wearable phone, now strapped to his wrist. The size of a sports watch, the phone ran on a thermopile that converted Firpo's excess bodyheat to electricity. It also served as a bodymonitor with continuous transdermal monitoring, sending telemetry back to the squad's HQ while Firpo

squelched through the sewers, wearing his memtax, übertoothed earbuds and a piezoelectric conduction mic strung on an innocuous locket around Firpo's throat.

Firpo's haptic bling—a smartring on each finger—completed his toolkit.

The Memtax settled into place and booted up. The Apple-Asustek app store icon hovered in the upper left corner of Firpo's field of vision, seemingly as real as the rest of his kitchen. He spread the icon open with a two-fingered gesture, his Haptic User Interface rings providing the tactile sensation of cutting a trough in a bowl of porridge. He quickly found Beer Goggles, and, for €3.99, downloaded it.

He started the little augie program running and directed it to the ElfQuest MMORPG site for its templates. The game had ten million players, over half of whom were women with distinct avatars. With that many images to choose from, the AI in Beer Goggles would certainly be able to overlay all the women Firpo could possibly meet in his lifetime with non-repeating masks.

The neat thing about Beer Googles was that it only came online when the user got drunk, as determined by his phone's measurement of the ethanol levels in his sweat. The app said it was operative now, but of course Firpo wasn't drunk. Yet he wanted to test it, so he overrode its defaults to bring it immediately online. Then he looked outside.

Rents were too high in Cambridge for Firpo to afford living there, and the city did not demand residence within its borders as a term of his employment, so he lived in a cheap neighborhood in Charlestown. His quarters were a leaky, drafty houseboat moored at a louche marina protruding practically from the base of the Bunker Hill Monument. Connected to the hungry sea, the rising waters of the Charles and Mystic Rivers had reached partway up Breed's Hill, drowning the old street-level neighborhood. The repurposed district had a certain gritty charm. Firpo always enjoyed watching the scuba divers below his boat, circulating through the drowned tenements in search of archaeological tidbits.

A Duck Tour was offloading a group of sightseers at an adjacent commercial dock. Judging by the snatches of excited conversation that drifted to him through his open window and by the appearance of the men, Firpo suspected the tourists hailed from Singapore or Malaysia. But judging by the women—old, young, fat, lithe, tall, short—the group hailed from

Abode, exotic world of two moons, Wolfriders and Sun Folk. Long pointy ears, big slanted lantern eyes, golden skin, heart-shaped delicate faces.

Firpo hurriedly dropped the shade on his window, his sudden arousal painfully pressing against his pants. He took Beer Goggles offline, and then brought up the active lifestreams of three of his posse from the Rogue Transgenic Squad, teleking them and arranging to meet them at the Cantab that evening.

Plenty of time to elven-ify the female world when he reached the bar.

* * * *

The house band at the Cantab Lounge, Jasmine Mofongo, pounded out their bhangra-bachata so loud that Firpo had to recalibrate his earbuds to filter out most of the music before he could hear his friends talk. Illumined like a cross between a hospital ward and a Victorian opium den, the Cantab was old, grotty and cramped, its staff rude and capricious, but the place felt like home to Firpo and his squad mates. They often came here straight from the showers after work, and had never once been called out for being a tad whiffy. The patrons were simply grateful for the protection from roaming sewer shoggoths, a popular urban legend. (One excessively wasted female patron claimed to have been attacked once by a pseudopod emerging from the Cantab toilets.)

Being a Saturday inching toward midnight, the joint was jamming. Firpo and his three friends had been lucky to get stools at the long scarred bar. A score of booty-shakers thronged the small dance floor. Balky heat pumps chuffed to chill the place, to little effect. The early June temps had averaged high nineties all week, and now the heat was baked into the building’s old skeleton, mere prelude to August torture.

Firpo was drinking a cocktail called “Important Intangible Cultural Property Number 86-1,” whose main component was the South Korean liquor munbaeju. The stuff was potent, and this was his second one. But he knew he wasn’t clinically drunk yet, because Beer Goggles had not kicked in one hundred percent. But the app’s stealthy oncoming seepage, an unadvertised surprise feature to Firpo, was tantalizing.

The app was using morphing algorithms to bring every woman closer to divine elfdom by degrees, the drunker Firpo got. Right now, all the females in the place looked like sixty-forty hybrids, with a preponderance of fey.

Imbibing a third “Important Intangible Cultural Property Number 86-1,” should provide the tipping point.

Glancing to his right at Ellie Salo, Firpo jumped a hair to see how his co-worker had been transformed. Uncanny, serkku! Her familiar pleasantly wide mouth, squarish chin and broad nose seemed to have been shaved down and resculpted by an invisible plastic surgeon, and her olive skin was assuming amber tones. The upper curve of her ear was trending Spock-wise.

Sight of the partially elven-ified Ellie left Firpo feeling confused. He didn’t want to hit on Ellie, or even consider her as an erotic object. Sex with co-workers was generally a bad idea—imagine having a lover’s spat in the stenchy subterranean dark while some unknown critter was stalking you—and he knew Ellie too well to harbor any romantic notions. But if her transformation continued, he’d be unable to keep his hands off her. And more alarmingly, she might not object to his attentions.

Firpo said, “Scuse me a minute,” and got up to head to the john. Once there, opened the Beer Goggles app’s preferences. Much to his relief, he found a blacklist option and entered Ellie’s phone number. He returned to his stool and gave a small sigh to find Ellie looking completely like her baseline self. He downed another gulp of cocktail, and was rewarded with an intensification of estrogen elvishness everywhere else.

“So like I was saying,” Ellie continued, “I hear that Celexion has brought a tankful of space squids online.”

On the far side of Ellie hunkered Ismail Bazzy, a nervous scarecrow in Carhartt coveralls trimmed with nutria-fur accents. Ismail lived on the edge of constant worry and collapse, but this very hair-trigger, tripwire state had saved their bacon more than once.

“Oh, great,” Ismail said. “Now we can expect to encounter krakens. I’m putting in for a raise.”

From Firpo’s left, Alun Lovat spoke up. An unflappable and dapper British ex-pat out of demi-drowned Liverpool, Alun seemed the antimatter counterpart to Ismail. And yet his sangfroid had proven equally valuable in the trenches. “Oh, come now, Izzy, they’re only small chaps.”

“Yeah, sure, now they are. But once they escape into that devil’s broth—and you know damn well they will—then you just wait and see—”

“What’s Celexion doing with the squids anyhow?” Firpo asked, while he tried to ignore the increasing allure of the bevy of pub-crawling, beer-swigging, gyrating Galadriels circulating all around.

Ellie answered. “They’re extracting some kind of useful lipids from their synaptic vesicles. The cosmic-ray-induced mutations did something really weird to those orbital cephalopods.”

Firpo’s third drink had arrived, and he downed a slug.

That was all it took. Within seconds, every woman in the Cantab went full-bore elf. The effect was like when black-and-white Kansas turned to Technicolor Oz.

Firpo slid jerkily off his stool like an untrained robot fresh from the factory. Ellie looked quizzical. “You okay?”

“Uh, yeah, fine, swell. It’s just—I think I see somebody I know over there and I wanna say hello.”

Firpo wasn’t lying. The woman he saw across the room was a creature he had long been familiar with from his dreams. He began to make a beeline in her direction.

Alun chuckled. “Do nothing not in my playbook, my lad.” Ismail said, “Be careful!” Ellie, sounding slightly disappointed, said, “We’ll see you before we leave.”

Firpo just nodded absentmindedly. Jasmine Mofongo launched into their big hit, “Mi Dulce de Hyderabad,” a song Firpo always loved, but he never heard a note.

* * * *

The space between Firpo and the elf woman he had singled out disappeared without his conscious volition. Standing with her female pals, nursing a drink, she had watched Firpo approach with a wry and knowing amusement. Now within her intoxicating personal space, he found himself momentarily unable to utter a sound.

Although her squad of buddies all exhibited elvish allure in differing proportions, the Beer Goggles had created something special in this one woman, perhaps having had a superior baseline body to map onto. But there also existed something authentically vibrant in her stance and attitude, the way she comported herself. Facially, she looked exactly like Leetah of the Sun Folk: masses of wavy red hair through which poked enormous lynx-

like ears; pool-like canted eyes, their green-painted lids echoing their emerald depths; arrowhead chin and complexion of buttery copper.

“Um,” Firpo stumbled. “Can I buy you a drink?”

“Got one.”

“Okay. Wanna dance?”

“Sure.”

Leetah handed off her glass to a pal, who sniffed discourteously (or was she whiffing Firpo’s *eau de cloaca*?), and they squished themselves into the sardine-thick dance floor pack.

Jasmine Mofongo segued into “You Say Somosa, I Say Pastelito,” perfect tune for a slow dance. Firpo took Leetah into his arms. He longed to stroke her impossibly tall and curvaceous ears, to see how well the haptic feedback matched the visuals, but he refrained.

After a few moments of sweaty shuffling more or less in place, Leetah said, “I’m just curious—what are you seeing when you look at me?”

Busted! Could he deny—?

“Don’t try to fool me. I saw from across the room how you went all googly when some kind of app kicked in. What is it?”

Why’d he have to pick a sharp, smart elf? Firpo resigned himself to starting over again, with some lesser goddess. But before he ditched her, he owed Leetah an answer, so he explained.

“Hmmm, well that’s not as icky as what I imagined.”

Firpo untensed. Maybe this could still go somewhere. “What about you? What are you seeing when you look at me?”

“The real you.”

“Not likely.”

“Fosho. I don’t do Ay-Are. No memtax.”

This perverse luddite revelation shocked Firpo more than getting caught out using Beer Goggles. Did he really want to get involved with such a modern primitive?

Undecided, and the song ending just then, he let Leetah lead him to a relatively quiet pocket in the room, near the entrance.

“No Ay-Are? How do you function?”

“Oh, I manage. But sometimes it is inconvenient. Like right now, for instance, you could save me a few steps if you order me another drink.”

Firpo teleked the Cantab's bartender, and soon they had fresh cold glasses in hand via the Boston Dynamics servebot. Just in time, for Leetah was reverting gradually to human. Firpo boosted his blood alcohol, and she popped back to Rivendell.

"Hey, by the way, I'm Firpo Manzello."

"Vicky Licorice."

"Fosho?"

"It's my pen name, but I've gotten to like it."

"Would I have seen any of your stuff?"

"Only if you have a pre-schooler at home. *Little Lost Dino Escapes the Vat*? *Little Lost Dino in Manhattan*? *Little Lost Dino Saves the Great Barrier Reef*?"

"Sorry."

"That's okay. I can hardly stand to read them myself once they're published."

An hour or so of amiable, intermittently teasing conversation ensued—although hearing a beautiful elf discourse about Cambridge city politics was slightly disconcerting—and around midnight Firpo felt ready to try for a kiss.

Unfortunately, that was the exact moment when all hell broke loose.

Days later, crowdsourced and media reports had comprehensively pinned down the nature of the event, which came to be labeled "Apparition Eve."

A coalition of monkeywrenchers—everyone from The Universal Grammar of Hate to Tragedians of the Commons—had hacked into augiespace with specter-bombing malware. Insidiously, their strikes arrived not all at once, but in a timed cascade where each new incident fed on prior confusion and chaos.

And one of the first, smaller assaults was against Firpo's new app, Beer Googles.

Leaning forward boozily to kiss a receptive Vicky Licorice, Firpo experienced instant yotta-terror as a gunshot boomed in his ears and he watched Vicky's head disintegrate in a bloody mist. He even had haptic feedback of a spasming body.

Firpo screamed like a pitchforked pig. For an infinite span of nauseous seconds, he was utterly convinced someone had randomly assassinated the woman in his arms.

But the non-reaction of the immediate bystanders—as well as Vicky's own confused exclamations, issuing from the ruins of her face—alerted him otherwise. However realisitic, it had all happened only in AR.

Elsewhere around the bar, other apparent Beer Goggles users—not all of them males—were showing similar distress.

An augie intruder popped up in Firpo's vision. The badass female warrior-type said, "Happy date-rape, bastard! Beer Goggles promotes violence to women! This has been a message from The Sisters of Lysistrata"

The specter dissolved in a spray of unicorn sparkles, but Vicky's ruined countenance remained. Firpo couldn't stand the horrible sight. Even as he awkwardly thumbed out his memtax, cursing, he found space to wonder how blowing up the heads of women could serve as the best possible anti-violence message.

The actual Vicky of course looked nothing like Leetah. A concerned expression filled a charming Latina face.

"What the fuck was that all about?"

His pulse slowing, Firpo told her. The other victims were calming down as well, and reconnecting with those they had seen killed.

Then the next attack struck.

A subset of the crowd shrieked and reared back from something invisible and threatening in the center of the Cantab. One woman screamed, "It's hell! Hell's opening up!" Another person yelled, "The teeth, the teeth!"

The shrieking of the damned filled Firpo's earbuds, and he plucked those out too. Now he felt truly insensate. Without his own connection to augiespace, Firpo had no notion of what the horrified patrons were seeing or why they had been selected out of the crowd. He felt bewildered and helpless.

People were beginning to surge toward the narrow exit. A stampede seemed imminent.

Vicky took charge. She grabbed Firpo's hand and pulled him outside.

The hot night air hit Firpo like a wool-padded sledgehammer. "My friends! They're still in there!"

Firpo attempted to re-enter the Cantab, but the sound of exploding stacks of amplifiers stopped him. Specters must have tricked Jasmine Mofongo into some kind of "turn it to 11" mistake with their equipment. Suddenly a

copious outflow of other fleeing patrons carried Firpo and Vicky out onto Massachusetts Avenue.

Dodging wild-eyed pedestrians, they regained the curb just in time. The orderly, scant flow of late-night vehicular traffic was disintegrating. Whatever specters the passing drivers were experiencing—children in the road, sudden sinkholes, giant kaiju, their dashboard telemetry red-lining—were causing them to swerve wildly and crash into lamposts, buildings and unfortunate pedestrians. The din was terrific: bending metal, fleshy impacts, sirens and screams.

Vicky pulled Firpo into the doorway of a shuttered store. “Your friends will have to manage on their own. The first responders will be here soon. We can’t do anything. We’ve got to get someplace safe. Where do you live?”

“Charlestown.”

“You’re closer. I’m way out in Waltham. Let’s go.”

Regaining a little more composure, Firpo took a step out from their sheltering niche, then stopped.

“What’s the matter?” Vicky said.

“I have no idea how to get home. I always followed the augie trail here.”

Vicky took some kind of antique handheld device out of her purse.

“What’s that?”

“GPS unit.”

“That must be fifty years old! It still works?”

“No memtax, you get creative. C’mon!”

They did not dare use the subway. The sound of titanic crashes emanating from underfoot was persuasion to stay aboveground. Even as cautious pedestrians, they ran into plenty of dangers. One of the worst was plummeting bodies, as baffled, specter-tormented victims were led to step from high windows and off rooftops that must have appeared to them as safe paths. Smokey fires contributed to the Dante’s Inferno atmosphere of a city in upheaval. Were other places under attack as well? Firpo had no way of knowing.

But eventually, after a few hours, Vicky and Firpo reached the relative safety of his houseboat and collapsed wearily into bed. After a few mumbled endearments, they both fell asleep.

And in the morning light, amidst the humbled wreckage of the city, augmented and physical, even without Beer Goggles, using just his naked eyes, a grateful Firpo discovered that Vicky looked plenty beautiful enough to drive all thoughts of Leetah and her kin forever from his mind.

LIFE IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

1.

Solar Girdle Emergency

Aurobindo Bandjalang got the emergency twing through his vib on the morning of August 8, 2121, while still at home in his expansive bachelor's digs. At 1LDK, his living space was three times larger than most unmarried individuals enjoyed, but his high-status job as a Power Jockey for New Perthpatna earned him extra perks.

While a short-lived infinitesimal flock of beard clippers grazed his face, A.B. had been showering and vibbing the weather feed for Reboot City Twelve: the more formal name for New Perthpatna.

Sharing his shower stall but untouched by the water, beautiful weather idol Midori Mimosa delivered the feed.

"Sunrise occurred this morning at three-oh-two AM. Max temp projected to be a comfortable, shirtsleeves thirty degrees by noon. Sunset at ten-twenty-nine PM this evening. Cee-oh-two at four-hundred-and-fifty parts per million, a significant drop from levels at this time last year. Good work, Rebooters!"

The new tweet/twinge/ping interrupted both the weather and A.B.'s ablutions. His vision greyed out for a few milliseconds as if a sheet of smoked glass had been slid in front of his MEMS contacts, and both his left palm and the sole of his left foot itched: Attention Demand 5.

A.B.'s boss, Jeetu Kissoon, replaced Midori Mimosa under the sparsely downfalling water: a dismaying and disinvigorating substitution. But A.B.'s virt-in-body operating system allowed for no squelching of twings tagged AD4 and up. Departmental policy.

Kissoon grinned and said, "Scrub faster, A.B. We need you here yesterday. I've got news of face-to-face magnitude."

"What's the basic quench?"

"Power transmission from the French farms is down by one percent. Sat photos show some kind of strange dust accumulation on a portion of the collectors. The on-site kybes can't respond to the stuff with any positive remediation. Where's it from, why now, and how do we stop it? We've got to send a human team down there, and you're heading it."

Busy listening intently to the bad news, A.B. had neglected to rinse properly. Now the water from the low-flow showerhead ceased, its legally mandated interval over. He'd get no more from that particular spigot till the evening. Kissoon disappeared from A.B.'s augmented reality, chuckling.

A.B. cursed with mild vehemence and stepped out of the stall. He had to use a sponge at the sink to finish rinsing, and then he had no sink water left for brushing his teeth. Such a hygienic practice was extremely old-fashioned, given self-replenishing colonies of germ-policing mouth microbes, but A.B. relished the fresh taste of toothpaste and the sense of righteous manual self-improvement. Something of a twentieth-century recreationist, Aurobindo. But not this morning.

Outside A.B.'s 1LDK: his home corridor, part of a well-planned, spacious, senses-delighting labyrinth featuring several public spaces, constituting the one-hundred-and-fiftieth floor of his urbmon.

His urbmon, affectionately dubbed "The Big Stink": one of over a hundred colossal, densely situated high-rise habitats that amalgamated into New Perthpatna.

New Perthpatna: one of over a hundred such Reboot Cities sited across the habitable zone of Earth, about twenty-five percent of the planet's landmass, collectively home to nine billion souls.

A.B. immediately ran into one of those half-million souls of The Big Stink: Zulqamain Safranski.

Zulqamain Safranski was the last person A.B. wanted to see.

Six months ago, A.B. had logged an ASBO against the man.

Safranski was a parkour. Harmless hobby—if conducted in the approved sports areas of the urbmon. But Safranski blithely parkour'd his ass all over the common spaces, often bumping into or startling people as he ricocheted from ledge to bench. After a bruising encounter with the aggressive urban bounder, A.B. had filed his protest, attaching AD tags to already filed but overlooked video footage of the offenses. Not altogether improbably, A.B.'s complaint had been the one to tip the scales against Safranski, sending him via police trundlebug to the nearest Sin Bin, for a punitively educational stay.

But now, all too undeniably, Safranski was back in New Perthpatna, and instantly in A.B.'s chance-met (?) face.

The buff, choleric, but laughably diminuitive fellow glared at A.B., then said, spraying spittle upward, “You just better watch your ass night and day, Bang-a-gong, or you might find yourself doing a *lâché* from the roof without really meaning to.”

A.B. tapped his ear and, implicity, his implanted vib audio pickup. “Threats go from your lips to the ears of the wrathful Ekh Dagina—and to the ASBO Squad as well.”

Safranski glared with wild-eyed malice at A.B., then stalked off, his planar butt muscles, outlined beneath the tight fabric of his mango-colored plugsuit, somehow conveying further ire by their natural contortions.

A.B. smiled. Amazing how often people still forgot the panopticon nature of life nowadays, even after a century of increasing immersion in and extension of null-privacy. Familiarity bred forgetfulness. But it was best to always recall, at least subliminally, that everyone heard and saw everything equally these days. Just part of the Reboot Charter, allowing a society to function in which people could feel universally violated, universally empowered.

At the elevator banks closest to home, A.B. rode up to the two-hundred-and-first floor, home to the assigned space for the urbmon’s Power Administration Corps. Past the big active mural depicting drowned Perth, fishes swimming round the BHP Tower. Tags in the air led him to the workpod that Jeetu Kissoon had chosen for the time being.

Kissoon looked good for ninety-seven years old: he could have passed for A.B.’s slightly older brother, but not his father. Coffee-bean skin, snowy temples, laugh lines cut deep, only slightly counterbalanced by somber eyes.

When Kissoon had been born, all the old cities still existed, and many, many animals other than goats and chickens flourished. Kissoon had seen the cities abandoned, and the Big Biota Crash, as well as the whole Reboot. Hard for young A.B. to conceive. The man was a walking history lesson. A.B. tried to honor that.

But Kissoon’s next actions soon evoked a yawp of disrespectful protest from the younger man.

“Here are the two other Jocks I’ve assigned to accompany you.”

Interactive dossiers hung before A.B.’s gaze. He two-fingered through them swiftly, growing more stunned by the second. Finally he burst out:

“You’re giving me a furry and a keek as helpers?”

“Tigerishka and Gershon Thales. They’re the best available. Live with them, and fix this glitch.”

Kissoon stabbed A.B. with a piercing stare, and A.B. realized this meatspace proximity had been demanded precisely to convey the intensity of Kissoon’s next words.

“Without power, we’re doomed.”

2.

45th Parallel Blues

Jet-assisted flight was globally interdicted. Not enough resources left to support regular commercial or recreational aviation. No military anywhere with a need to muster its own air force. Jet engines too harmful to a stressed atmosphere.

And besides, why travel?

Everywhere was the same. Vib served fine for most needs.

The habitable zone of Earth consisted of those lands—both historically familiar and newly disclosed from beneath vanished icepack—above the 45th parallel north, and below the 45th parallel south. The rest of the Earth’s landmass had been desertified or drowned: sand or surf.

The immemorial ecosystems of the remaining climactically tolerable territories had been devastated by Greenhouse change, then, ultimately and purposefully, wiped clean. Die-offs, migratory invaders, a fast-forward churn culminating in an engineered ecosphere. The new conditions supported no animals larger than mice, and only a monoculture of GM plants.

Giant aggressive hissing cockroaches, of course, still thrived.

A portion of humanity’s reduced domain hosted forests specially designed for maximum carbon uptake and sequestration. These fast-growing, long-lived hybrid trees blended the genomes of eucalyptus, loblolly pine and poplar, and had been dubbed “eulollypops.”

The bulk of the rest of the land was devoted to the crops necessary and sufficient to feed nine billion people: mainly quinoa, kale and soy, fertilized by human wastes. Sugarbeet plantations provided feedstock for bio-polymer production.

And then, on their compact footprints, the hundred-plus Reboot Cities, ringed by small but efficient goat and chicken farms.

Not a world conducive to sightseeing Grand Tours.

On each continent, a simple network of maglev trains, deliberately held to a sparse schedule, linked the Reboot Cities (except for the Sin Bins, which were sanitarily excluded from easy access to the network). Slow but luxurious aerostats serviced officials and businessmen. Travel between continents occurred on SkySail-equipped water ships. All travel was predicated on state-certified need.

And when anyone had to deviate from standard routes—such as a trio of Power Jockeys following the superconducting transmission lines south to France—they employed a trundlebug.

Peugeot had designed the first trundlebugs over a century ago, the Ozones. Picture a large rolling drum fashioned of electrochromic biopoly, featuring slight catenaries in the lines of its body from end to end. A barrel-shaped compartment suspended between two enormous wheels large as the cabin itself. Solid-state battery packs channeled power to separate electric motors. A curving door spanned the entire width of the vehicle, sliding upward.

Inside, three seats in a row, the center one commanding the failsafe manual controls. Storage behind the seats.

And in those seats:

Aurobindo Bandjalang working the joystick with primitive recreationist glee and vigor, rather than vibbing the trundlebug.

Tigerishka on his right and Gershon Thales on his left.

A tense silence reigned.

Tigerishka exuded a bored professionalism only slightly belied by a gently twitching tailtip and alertly cocked tufted ears. Her tigrine pelt poked out from the edges of her plugsuit, pretty furred face and graceful neck the largest bare expanse.

A.B. thought she smelled like a sexy stuffed toy. Disturbing.

She turned her slit-pupiled eyes away from the monotonous racing landscape for a while to gnaw delicately with sharp teeth at a wayward cuticle around one claw.

Furries chose to express non-inheritable parts of the genome of various extinct species within their own bodies, as a simultaneous expiation of guilt

and celebration of lost diversity. Although the Vaults at Reboot City Twenty-nine (formerly Svalbard, Norway) safely held samples of all the vanished species that had been foolish enough to compete with humanity during this Anthropocene Age, their non-human genomes awaiting some far-off day of re-instantiation, that sterile custody did not sit well with some. The furries wanted other species to walk the earth again, if only by partial proxy.

In contrast to Tigerishka's stolid boredom, Gershon Thales manifested a frenetic desire to maximize demands on his attention. Judging by the swallow-flight motions of his hands, he had half a dozen virtual windows open, upon what landscapes of information A.B. could only conjecture. (He had tried vibbing into Gershon's eyes, but had encountered a pirate privacy wall. Hard to build team camaraderie with that barrier in place, but A.B. had chosen not to call out the man on the matter just yet.)

No doubt Gershon was hanging out on keek fora. The keeks loved to indulge in endless talk.

Originally calling themselves the "punctuated equilibriumists," the cult had swiftly shortened their awkward name to the "punk eeks," and then to the "keeks."

The keeks believed that after a long period of stasis, the human species had reached one of those pivotal Darwinian climacterics that would launch the race along exciting if unpredictable new vectors. What everyone else viewed as a grand tragedy—implacable and deadly climate change leading to the Big Biota Crash—they interpreted as a useful kick in humanity's collective pants. They discussed a thousand, thousand schemes intended to further this leap, most of them just so much mad vaporware.

A.B. clucked his tongue softly as he drove. Such were the assistants he had been handed, to solve a crisis of unknown magnitude.

Tigerishka suddenly spoke, her voice a velvet growl. "Can't you push this bug any faster? The cabin's starting to stink like simians already."

New Perthpatna occupied the site that had once hosted the Russian city of Arkhangelsk, torn down during the Reboot. The closest malfunctioning solar collectors in what had once been France loomed 2800 kilometers distant. Mission transit time: an estimated thirty-six hours, including overnight rest.

“No, I can’t. As it is, we’re going to have to camp at least eight hours for the batteries recharge. The faster I push us, the more power we expend, and the longer we’ll have to sit idle. It’s a calculated tradeoff. Look at the math.”

A.B. vibbed Tigerishka a presentation. She studied it, then growled in frustration.

“I need to run! I can’t sit cooped up in a smelly can like this for hours at a stretch! At home, I hit the track every hour.”

A.B. wanted to say, *I’m not the one who stuck those big-cat codons in you, so don’t yell at me!* But instead he notched up the cabin’s HVAC and chose a polite response. “Right now, all I can do is save your nose some grief. We’ll stop for lunch, and you can get some exercise then. Can’t you vib out like old Gershon there?”

Gerson Thales stopped his air haptics to glare at A.B. His lugubrious voice resembled wet cement plopping from a trough. “What’s that comment supposed to imply? That I’m wasting my time? Well, I’m not. I’m engaged in posthuman dialectics at Saltation Central. Very stimulating. You two should try to expand your minds in a similar fashion.”

Tigerishka hissed. A.B. ran an app that counted to ten for him using gently breaking waves to time the calming sequence.

“As mission leader, I don’t really care how anyone passes the travel time. Just so long as you all perform when it matters. Now how about letting me enjoy the drive.”

The “road” actually required little of A.B.’s attention. A wide border of rammed earth, kept free of weeds by cousins to A.B. beard removers, the road paralleled the surprisingly dainty superconducting transmission line that powered a whole city. It ran straight as modern justice toward the solar collectors that fed it. Shade from the rows of eulollypops planted alongside cut down any glare and added coolness to their passage.

Coolness was a desideratum. The further south they traveled, the hotter things would get. Until, finally, temperatures would approach fifty degrees at many points of the Solar Girdle. Only their plugsuits would allow the Power Jockeys to function outside under those conditions.

A.B. tried to enjoy the sensations of driving, a recreationist pasttime he seldom got to indulge. Most of his work day consisted of indoor maintenance and monitoring, optimization of supply and demand, the

occasional high-level debugging. Humans possessed a fluidity of response and insight no kybes could yet match. A field expedition marked a welcome change of pace from this indoor work. Or would have, with comrades more congenial.

A.B. sighed, and kicked up their speed just a notch.

After traveling for nearly five hours, they stopped for lunch, just a bit north of where Moscow had once loomed. No Reboot City had ever been erected in its place, more northerly locations being prefered.

As soon as the wide door slid upward, Tigerishka bolted from the cabin. She raced laterally off into the endless eulollypop forest, faster than a baseline human. Thirty seconds later, a rich, resonant, hair-raising caterwaul of triumph made both A.B. and Gershon Thales jump.

Thales said drily, “Caught a mouse, I suppose.”

A.B. laughed. Maybe Thales wasn’t such a stiff.

A.B. jacked the trundlebug into one of the convenient stepdown charging nodes in the transmission cable designed for just such a purpose. Even an hour’s topping up would help. Then he broke out sandwiches of curried goat salad. He and Thales ate companionably. Tigerishka returned with a dab of overlooked murine blood at the corner of her lips, and declined any human food.

Back in the moving vehicle, Thales and Tigerishka reclined their seats and settled down to a nap after lunch, and their drowsiness soon infected A.B. He put the trundlebug on autopilot, reclined his own seat, and soon was fast asleep as well.

Awaking several hours later, A.B. discovered their location to be nearly atop the 54th parallel, in the vicinity of pre-Crash Minsk.

The temperature outside their cozy cab registered a sizzling thirty-five, despite the declining sun.

“We’ll push on toward Old Warsaw, then call it a day. That’ll leave just a little over eleven hundred klicks to cover tomorrow.”

Thales objected. “We’ll get to the farms late in the day tomorrow—too late for any useful investigation. Why not run all nite on autopilot?”

“I want us to get a good night’s rest without jouncing around. And besides, all it would take is a tree freshly down across the road, or a new sinkhole to ruin us. The autopilot’s not infallible.”

Tigerishka’s sultry purr sent tingles through A.B.’s scrotum. “I need to work out some kinks myself.”

Night halted the trundlebug. When the door slid up, furnace air blasted the trio, automatically activating their plugsuits. Sad old fevered planet. They pulled up their cowls and felt relief.

Three personal homestatic pods were decanted, and popped open upon vibbed command beneath the allée. They crawled inside separately to eat and drop off quickly to sleep.

Stimulating caresses awakened A.B. Hazily uncertain what hour this was that witnessed Tigerishka’s trespass upon his homeopod, or whether she had visited Thales first, he could decisively report in the morning, had such a report been required by Jeetu Kissoon and the Power Administration Corps, that she retained enough energy to wear him out.

3.

The Sands of Paris

The vast, forbidding, globe-encircling desert south of the 45th parallel depressed everyone in the trundlebug. A.B. ran his tongue around lips that felt impossibly cracked and parched, no matter how much water he sucked from his plugsuit’s kamelbak.

All greenery gone, the uniform trackless and silent wastes baking under the implacable sun brought to mind some alien world that had never known human tread. No signs of the mighty cities that had once reared their proud towers remained, nor any traces of the sprawling suburbs, the surging highways. What had not been disassembled for re-use elsewhere had been buried.

On and on the trundlebug rolled, following the superconductor line, its enormous wheels operating as well on loose sand as on rammed earth.

A.B. felt anew the grievous historical impact of humanity’s folly upon the planet, and he did not relish the emotions. He generally devoted little thought to that sad topic.

An utterly modern product of his age, a hardcore Rebooter through and through, Aurobindo Bandjalang was generally happy with his civilization. Its contorted features, its limitations and constraints, its precariousness, and

its default settings he accepted implicitly, just as a child of trolls believes its troll mother to be utterly beautiful.

He knew pride in how the human race had managed to build a hundred new cities from scratch and shift billions of people north and south in only half a century, outracing the spreading blight and killer weather. He enjoyed the hybrid multicultural melange that had replaced old divisions and rivalries, the new blended mankind. The nostalgic stories told by Jeetu Kissoon and others of his generation were entertaining fairytales, not the chronicle of any lost Golden Age. He could not lament what he had never known. He was too busy keeping the delicate structures of the present day up and running, and happy to be so occupied.

Trying to express these sentiments and lift the spirits of his comrades, A.B. found that his evaluation of Reboot civilization was not universal.

“Every human of this fallen Anthropocene age is shadowed by the myriad ghosts of all the other creatures they drove extinct,” said Tigerishka, in a surprisingly poetic and somber manner, given her usual blunt and unsentimental earthiness. “Whales and dolphins, cats and dogs, cows and horses—they all peer into and out of our sinful souls. Our only shot at redemption is that some day, when the planet is restored, our coevolved partners might be re-embodied.”

Thales uttered a scoffing grunt. “Good riddance to all that nonsapient genetic trash! Homo sapiens is the only desirable endpoint of all evolutionary lines. But right now, the dictatorial Reboot has our species locked down in a dead end. We can’t make the final leap to our next level until we get rid of the chaff.”

Tigerishka spat, and made a taunting feint toward her co-worker across A.B.s chest, causing A.B. to swerve the car and Thales to recoil. When the keek realized he hadn’t actually been hurt, he grinned with a sickly superciliousness.

“Hold on one minute,” said A.B. “Do you mean that you and the other keeks want to see another Crash?”

“It’s more complex than that. You see—”

But A.B.’s attention was diverted that moment from Thales’s explanation. His vib interrupted with a Demand Four call from his apartment.

Vib nodes dotted the power transmission network, keeping people online just like at home. Plenty of dead zones existed elsewhere, but not here,

adjacent to the line.

A.B. had just enough time to place the trundlebug on autopilot before his vision was overlaid with a feed from home.

The security system on his apartment had registered an unauthorized entry.

Inside his 1LDK, an optical distortion the size of a small human moved around, spraying something similar to used cooking oil on A.B.s furniture. The hands holding the sprayer disappeared inside the whorl of distortion.

A.B. vibbed his avatar into his home system. “Hey, you! What the fuck are you doing!”

The person wearing the invisibility cape laughed, and A.B. recognized the distinctive crude chortle of Zulqamain Safranski.

“Safranski! Your ass is grass! The ASBO’s are on their way!”

Unable to stand the sight of his lovely apartment being desecrated, frustrated by his inability to take direct action himself, A.B. vibbed off.

Tigerishka and Thales had shared the feed, and commiserated with their fellow Power Jock. But the experience soured the rest of the trip for A.B., and he stewed silently until they reached the first of the extensive constructions upon which the Reboot Cities relied for their very existence.

The Solar Girdle featured a tripartite setup, for the sake of security of supply.

First came the extensive farms of solar updraft towers: giant chimneys that fostered wind flow from base to top, thus powering their turbines.

Then came parabolic mirrored troughs that followed the sun and pumped heat into special sinks, lakes of molten salts, which in turn ran different turbines after sunset.

Finally, serried ranks of photovoltaic panels generated electricity directly. These structures, in principle the simplest and least likely to fail, were the ones experiencing difficulties from some kind of dust accretion.

Vibbing GPS coordinates for the troublespot, A.B. brought the trundlebug up to the infected photovoltaics. Paradoxically, the steady omnipresent whine of the car’s motors registered on his attention only when he had powered them down.

Outside the vehicle’s polarized plastic shell, the sinking sun glared like the malign orb of a Cyclops bent on mankind’s destruction.

When the bug-wide door slid up, dragon’s breath assailed the Power Jocks. Their plugsuits strained to shield them from the hostile environment.

Surprisingly, a subdued and pensive Tigerishka volunteered for camp duty. As dusk descended, she attended to erecting their intelligent shelters and getting a meal ready: chicken croquettes with roasted edamame.

A.B. and Thales sluffed through the sand for a dozen yards to the nearest infected solarcell platform. The keek held his pocket lab in gloved hand.

A little maintenance kybe, scuffed and scorched, perched on the high trellis, valiantly but fruitlessly chipping with its multitool at a hard siliceous shell irregularly encrusting the photovoltaic surface.

Thales caught a few flakes of the unknown substance as they fell, and inserted them into the analysis chamber of the pocket lab.

“We should have a complete readout of the composition of this stuff by morning.”

“No sooner?”

“Well, actually, by midnight. But I don’t intend to stay up. I’ve done nothing except sit on my ass for two days, yet I’m still exhausted. It’s this oppressive place—”

“Okay,” A.B. replied. The first stars had begun to prinkle the sky. “Let’s call it a day.”

They ate in the bug, in a silent atmosphere of forced companionability, then retired to their separate shelters.

A.B. hoped with mild lust for another nocturnal visit from a prowling Tigerishka, but was not greatly disappointed when she never showed to interrupt his intermittent drowsing. Truly, the desert sands of Paris sapped all his usual joie de vivre.

Finally falling fast asleep, he dreamed of the ghostly waters of the vanished Seine, impossibly flowing deep beneath his tent. Somehow, Zulqamain Safranski was diverting them to flood A.B.’s apartment….

4.

The Red Queen’s Triathalon

In the morning, after breakfast, A.B. approached Gershon Thales, who stood apart near the trundlebug. Already the sun thundered down its oppressive cargo of photons, so necessary for the survival of the Reboot

Cities, yet, conversely, just one more burden for the overstressed Greenhouse ecosphere. Feeling irritable and impatient, anxious to be back home, A.B. dispensed with pleasantries.

“I’ve tried vibbing your pocket lab for the results, but you’ve got it offline, behind that pirate software you’re running. Open up, now.”

The keek stared at A.B. with mournful stolidity. “One minute, I need something from my pod.”

Thales ducked into his tent. A.B. turned to Tigerishka. “What do you make—”

Blinding light shattered A.B.’s vision for a millisecond in a painful nova, before his MEMS contacts could react protectively by going opaque. Tigerishka vented a stifled yelp of surprise and shock, showing she had gotten the same actinic eyekick.

A.B. immediately thought of vib malfunction, some misdirected feed from a solar observatory, say. But then, as his lenses de-opaqued, he realized the stimulus had to have been external.

When he could see again, he confronted Gershon Thales holding a pain gun whose wide bell muzzle covered both of the keek’s fellow Power Jocks. At the feet of the keek rested an exploded spaser grenade.

A.B. tried to vib, but got nowhere.

“Yes,” Thales said, “we’re in a dead zone now. I fried all the optical circuits of the vib nodes with the grenade.”

A large enough burst of surface plasmons could do that? Who knew? “But why?”

With his free hand, keeping the pain gun unwavering, Thales reached into a plugsuit pocket and took out his lab. “These results. They’re only the divine sign we’ve been waiting for. Reboot civilization is on the way out now. I couldn’t let anyone in the PAC find out. The longer they stay in the dark, the more irreversible the changes will be.”

“You’re claiming this creeping crud is that dangerous?”

“Did you ever hear of ADRECS?”

A.B. instinctively tried to vib for the info and hit the blank frustrating walls of the newly created dead zone. Trapped in the twentieth century! Recreationist passions only went so far. Where was the panopticon when you needed it!?!

“Aerially Delivered Re-forestation and Erosion Control System,” continued Thales. “A package of geoengineering schemes meant to stablize the spread of deserts. Abandoned decades ago. But apparently, one scheme’s come alive again on its own. Mutant instruction drift is my best guess. Or Darwin’s invisible hand.”

“What’s come alive then?”

“Nanosand. Meant to catalyze the formation of macroscale walls that would block the flow of normal sands.”

“And that’s the stuff afflicting the solarcells?”

“Absolutely. Has an affinity for bonding with the surface of the cells and can’t be removed with destroying them. Self-replicating. Best estimates are that the nanosand will take out thirty percent of production in just a month, if left unchecked. Might start to affect the turbines too.”

Tigerishka asked, in an intellectually curious tone of voice that A.B. found disconcerting, “But what good does going offline do? When PAC can’t vib us, they’ll just send another crew.”

“I’ll wait here and put them out of commission too. I only have to hang in for a month.”

“What about food?” said Tigerishka. “We don’t have enough provisions for a month, even for one person.”

“I’ll raid the fish farms on the coast. Desalinate my drinking water. It’s just a short round trip by bug.”

A.B. could hardly contain his disgust. “You’re fucking crazy, Thales. Dropping the power supply by thirty percent won’t kill the cities.”

“Oh, but we keeks think it will. You see, Reboot civilization is a wobbly three-legged stool, hammered together in a mad rush. We’re not in the Red Queen’s Race, but the Red Queen’s Triathalon. Power, food and social networks. Take out any one leg, and it all goes down. And we’re sawing at the other two legs as well. Look at that guy who vandalized your apartment. Behavior like that is on the rise. The urbmons are driving people crazy. Humans weren’t meant to live in hives.”

Tigerishka stepped forward, and Thales swung the gun more towards her unprotected face. A blast of high-intensity microwaves would leave her screaming, writhing and puking on the sands.

“I want in,” she said, and A.B.’s heart sank through his boots. “The only way other species will ever get to share this planet is when most of mankind

is gone.”

Regarding the furry speculatively and clinically, Thales said, “I could use your help. But you’ll have to prove yourself. First, tie up Bandjalang.”

Tigerishka grinned vilely at A.B. “Sorry, apeboy.”

Using biopoly cords from the bug, she soon had A.B. trussed with circulation-deadening bonds, and stashed in his homeopod.

What were they doing out there!?! A.B. squirmed futilely. He banged around so much, he began to fear he was damaging the life-preserving tent, and he stopped. Wiped out after hours of struggle, he fell into a stupor made more ennervating by the suddenly less-than-ideal heat inside the homeopod, whose compromised systems strained to deal with the desert conditions. He began to hallucinate about the subterranean Seine again, and realized he was very, very thirsty. His kamelbak was dry when he sipped at its straw.

At some point, Tigerishka appeared and gave him some water. Or did she? Maybe it was all just another dream.

Outside the smart tent, night came down. A.B. heard wolves howling, just like they did on archived documentaries. Wolves? No wolves existed. But someone was howling.

Tigerishka having sex. Sex with Thales. Bastard. Bad guy not only won the battle, but got the girl as well….

A.B. awoke to the pins and needles of returning circulation: discomfort of a magnitude unfelt by anyone before or after the Lilliputians tethered Gulliver.

Tigerishka was bending over him, freeing him.

“Sorry again, apeboy, that took longer than I thought. He even kept his hand on the gun right up until he climaxed.”

Something warm was dripping on A.B.’s face. Was his rescuer crying? Her voice belied any such emotion. A.B. raised a hand that felt like a block of wood to his own face, and clumsily smeared the liquid around, until some entered his mouth.

He imagined that this forbidden taste was equally as satisfying to Tigerishka as mouse fluids.

Heading north, the trundlebug seemed much more spacious with just two passengers. The corpse of Gershon Thales had been left behind, for eventual recovery by experts. Dessication and cooking would make it a fine mummy.

Once out of the dead zone, A.B. vibbed everything back to Jeetu Kissoon, and got a shared commendation that made Tigerishka purr. Then he turned his attention to his personal queue of messages.

The ASBO Squad had bagged Safranski. But they apologized for some delay in his sentencing hearing. Their caseload was enormous these days.

Way down at the bottom of his queue was an agricultural newsfeed. An unprecedented kind of black rot fungus had made inroads into the kale crop on the farms supplying Reboot City Twelve.

Calories would be tight in New Perthpatna, but only for a while.

Or so they hoped.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This story is indebted to Gaia Vince and her article in *New Scientist*, "Surviving in a Warmer World."

LITTLE WORKER

Little Worker came awake instantly. Lying curled on the red-and-black-figured carpet before Mister Michael's bedroom door, she stretched her limbs beneath her plain beige sleeveless shift, then stood on bare feet. Mister Michael, she could sense, was still asleep. Mister Michael deserved to sleep, for Mister Michael worked hard. Little Worker worked hard too, but she never slept late in the mornings, for there was too much to be done. (If Mister Michael stayed put in his office today, Little Worker would nap at his feet.) But in the mornings, Little Worker always awoke before Mister Michael. She always would. It was her way.

Little Worker appeared unwontedly reluctant to leave her nightly station. Something, this morning, did not smell right. She sniffed the air intently, nostrils twitching. The troublesome odor was nothing she could identify. It was new. This was not necessarily bad, but might be. The new smell emanated from behind Mister Michael's door. It was not a dangerous smell, so Little Worker could not bring herself to knock or otherwise disturb Mister Michael. He would be up and about soon enough, for Mister Michael had a busy schedule. Perhaps then the source of the new smell would be revealed. Perhaps not. In either case, Mister Michael would instruct her about anything she needed to know.

Little Worker tucked strands of her moderate-length, stiff brown hair behind her ears. She brushed the wrinkles out of her shift. They disappeared swiftly from the dull utilitarian fabric. She curried the short fur on her face and licked beneath her arms. Her morning grooming completed, she set out for the kitchen.

First Little Worker had to go down a long hall. The long hall had a veined marble floor, down the center of which ran the red and black carpet with its oriental design. The long hall had large mullioned windows in its stone walls. Some of these windows had panes of stained glass. Through the eastern windows came bright winter sunlight. When it passed through the colored panes, it made lozenges of various hues on the carpet. Little Worker admired these dapples, for they reminded her of dabs of jelly on toast. Little Worker liked jelly on toast. She would have some this morning. She usually had some every morning, except when she took an egg to add glossiness to

her coat. Little Worker, with the aid of the food-center, could cook whatever she wanted for herself. This was one of her privileges. Mister Michael himself had said, when first she came to live here, “Little Worker, you may order the food-center to prepare whatever you want for yourself.” This had made her proud. In the Training School, she had had to eat whatever the trainers set out for her. But Mister Michael trusted her.

The next door down the long hall from Mister Michael’s belonged to the bedroom of Mister Michael’s wife. Little Worker lifted her nose as she came abreast of the door, intent on passing without stopping. However, noises from beyond the door made her stop. The noises were thrashings and moanings and grunts. Little Worker suspected what the noises were, but curiosity impelled her to look anyway.

The handle of the door was shaped like a thick curled gold leaf. Above the handle was a security keypad. Below was an old-fashioned keyhole. Little Worker put one big hazel eye to the hole.

It was as Little Worker had suspected. Mister Michael’s naked wife was draped bellydown over a green plush hassock, being covered by her latest andromorph, a scion of the Bull line. Little Worker could smell mixed male and female sweat and a sexual musk.

The sight disturbed Little Worker. Mister Michael’s wife was not the kind of wife he deserved. Little Worker ceased her spying and continued on toward the kitchen.

At the end of the long hall was a curving flight of wide marble stairs. Here the runner ended. The marble was cold beneath Little Worker’s feet. She went down the stairs quickly.

On the ground floor, Little Worker first crossed a broad reception hall along the walls of which were ranged busts on plinths, potted plants, and gold-framed paintings. She passed through a huge salon used for formal affairs, then through Mister Michael’s study, with its big walnut desk and shelves of books and wall-sized plasma screen. Several more chambers intervened before the kitchen, but finally Little Worker reached that chrome and tile room.

Most mornings, as now, the large kitchen was empty. On the mornings of those days when there were to be state dinners, the kitchen was bustling early with hired chefs, who prepared the more complex dishes the food-center could not handle. Little Worker disliked such interruptions of her

normal schedule. However, this was not such a morning. The kitchen was empty.

Little Worker advanced to the food-center.

“Food-center, prepare me toast with jelly,” she said.

“There is no more bread,” replied the food-center.

No more bread. Little Worker was disconcerted. She had had her heart set on toast and jelly. What could have happened to the supply of bread? Yesterday there had been plenty.

“What has happened to the bread?” asked Little Worker.

“Last night Mister Michael’s wife fed it all to the Bull andromorph. He ate three loaves. There were only three loaves. Thus there are no more.”

Mister Michael’s wife had fed all of Little Worker’s toast to her Bull. It was the fault of Mister Michael’s wife that there was no toast this morning for Little Worker.

“The bakery delivery occurs at ten o’clock this morning,” offered the food-center helpfully.

“I will be gone with Mister Michael by then. I will not be home at ten o’clock. I must eat something different.” Little Worker paused to reflect. “I will have hot cereal with a spoon of jelly on it.”

“There is no jelly. The Bull ate that also. With peanut butter.”

Little Worker tensed her fingers reflexively. Her morning, disturbed already by the new odor coming from Mister Michael’s bedroom, was not getting better. The change in routine upset her. It felt like a morning when chefs came. But no chefs were here.

“I will have an egg then,” said Little Worker.

“There are eggs,” said the food-center.

“There is no jelly for an egg?” hopefully asked Little Worker one last time.

“There is no jelly even for an egg.”

“Then I will have an egg alone.”

Little Worker sat at a table with metal legs and white tile top. When her egg came she ate it, licking the plate to get all the yolk. It would serve to make her fur glossy. But it did not taste as good as jelly.

When she was done, Little Worker ordered the food-center to prepare and serve breakfast for Mister Michael and his wife in the south dining room.

Then she walked through halls and storage rooms until she arrived at the south dining room.

Mister Michael was already there, seated at one end of a long polished table, reading a newspaper and sipping coffee.

“Good morning, Mister Michael,” said Little Worker.

“Morning,” said Mister Michael somewhat gruffly.

Little Worker quivered inside. Mister Michael did not seem himself this morning. He worked too hard, thought Little Worker. He had too much on his mind. The state demanded too much of him. He should be better to himself.

Little Worker coiled up at Mister Michael’s feet beside the table, where she could watch everything that happened.

Breakfast was served. Mister Michael’s wife did not arrive on time. Mister Michael began to eat anyway. Only when the fine Canadian ham and scrambled eggs and poached fish were cold did she come through the door.

Mister Michael’s wife was dressed for shopping. She wore an ivory jacket short in front but with long tails that hung to her knees in back, over a pale blue silk blouse and tulip-hemmed ivory skirt. She wore blue metallic stockings and creamy high heels. She smelled heavily of expensive perfume, which failed to conceal entirely from Little Worker’s keen nose the aromas of her recent mating.

Sitting gingerly, as if sore, Mister Michael’s wife picked idly at the food set before her. Neither she nor Mister Michael spoke for some time. Finally, though, setting down his paper, which rustled loudly to Little Worker’s ears, Mister Michael said, “There are some important people coming up today from Washington. They’ll want to meet you.”

“How very tedious. And what time would that be?”

Mister Michael seemed to be restraining his anger. “Around two.”

“I’ll try to be there.”

Mister Michael’s anger escaped. “Try! You’d damn well better be there. As my wife, you have certain official responsibilities, just as I do.”

“No one elected me to be the prime minister’s wife.”

“You elected yourself when you married me. You can’t pretend you didn’t. You knew quite well that I might end up as prime minister someday. I told you so from the outset. God, what do I ask of you, other than to show

up for a few ceremonial occasions? Do you imagine I've got it any easier? It's not a part-time job, governing a whole bloody continent!"

"You wanted the job. I didn't."

Mister Michael folded his hands, as if afraid of what they might do. Little Worker's hands clenched in sympathy.

"Let's not argue, shall we? Please make every effort to be at the Ministry by two."

"I'll simply rush through the stores then."

"Good. I appreciate it." Mister Michael looked down at Little Worker. "It's time to go. Would you please get my briefcase? I left it by the bed."

Little Worker quickly gained her feet, eager to please. "I will get your briefcase. Where will you be?"

"Just inside the front door. Oh, have the car pull around also."

"I will have the car pull around," agreed Little Worker.

On the way to the garage, Little Worker considered the argument she had overheard. She reached the same conclusion she had arrived at while standing before Mister Michael's wife's bedroom door: Mister Michael's wife was not a good one for him.

In the garage, Little Worker confronted the sleek, low-slung car. "Mister Michael wishes you to idle at the front entrance."

"I will exit the garage, after opening the door. I will proceed down the drive, through the gate, after opening that also, and around to the front entrance. There I will await further orders."

"Good."

The car started its ceramic engine and opened the garage door. Little Worker left it. She took the back stairs to the second floor and approached Mister Michael's bedroom from a direction different than that by which she had gone earlier.

The door was ajar. Little Worker entered.

The room was not empty.

Lying languidly on the bed among the rumpled sheets was a naked gynomorph. When she heard Little Worker enter, she opened her eyes.

"Hello," said the gynomorph. "I am a hetaera, of the Lyrical line. Do you wish to hear me sing?"

Little Worker was stunned. "No. I do not wish to hear you sing. What are you doing here?"

“I am now owned by Mister Michael. He brought me here. Do you wish to know my pedigree?”

“No.”

“I will recite it anyway. I am comprised of five species, with three percent being human. My skeletal structure is avian, insuring a lightness and appealing fragility. I weigh only forty kilos. My musculature is feline, my skin a derivative of chamois. My brain is based on that of a mink. I have a vaginal contractile index of ninety. My pheromones are tailored specifically to arouse Mister Michael.”

The gynomorph moved her legs and arms luxuriously and arched her back slightly, elevating her pubis. Little Worker stared furiously, her mind in turmoil.

“I am comprised of twelve species, with a full ten percent being human,” she finally countered.

“My measurements, in centimeters, are one hundred, forty, eighty. What are yours?”

Little Worker looked down at her stocky, compact, and muscled form beneath her shift. “I do not know my measurements,” she said.

The gynomorph smiled, revealing delicate pointed teeth. She ran a tongue over her lips. Little Worker could hear it rasp.

“Well,” said the hetaera, “I guess you don’t know much, do you?”

“It seems not,” said Little Worker.

* * * *

Now they were at the office. The office was different from home: different noises, different smells. There were no windows in Mister Michael’s office, no blots of jelly-light on the tan carpet, into which Little Worker’s garment nearly blended. At home, Little Worker could do pretty much as she pleased, as long as she was there should Mister Michael need her. At the office—and in other public places—she had to be more circumspect and diligent. Little Worker was on duty here, in a way that was more intense than behind the electrified fence and active sensors of the estate. Little Worker normally prided herself on her diligence. (Once, one of the men at the Training School had said: “Little Worker, you are the most diligent companion I’ve ever trained.” The men of the school had been nice, in their stern way. But no one was like Mister Michael.)

Today, however, Little Worker's mind was not on her work.

Mister Michael's first afternoon appointment had been shown in. Little Worker lay quietly behind Mister Michael's big brown leather chair with the brass studs. Mister Michael was meeting with the people from Washington. Little Worker paid scant attention to them. They had been cleared by Security and smelled harmless. Little Worker couldn't even see the visitors from her vantage. They were just a collection of mildly annoying voices, which interfered with her contemplation of the new and disturbing events at home.

When Little Worker and Mister Michael had gotten into the car, Little Worker had circumspectly sniffed Mister Michael to see if any of the hetaera's odors still clung to him. She was relieved to find that none did. Mister Michael must have washed. For a moment she felt heartened. But as the car accelerated down the front drive, picking up its entourage of armored outriders on cycles at the security station on the periphery of the estate, Little Worker realized that her relief was wrong. Mister Michael might smell normal, but his attitude was disturbed. He was not his usual self.

Little Worker wished she could somehow make everything right for poor Mister Michael, who worked so hard and whose wife was so bad that he had to seek relief in the arms of that disturbing gynomorph.

Little Worker would do anything to make Mister Michael happy.

The visitors continued to talk. Little Worker was hungry. Mister Michael had worked straight through their regular lunch hour. She would have toast with jelly for her belated midday meal, the first chance she got. Surely the Ministry's kitchens would be able to supply some. Perhaps she could convince the home food-center—which was rather stupid—not to dispense any more bread or jelly to the Bull andromorph. It would be worth a try.

Little Worker was suddenly bored with her own problems, since no easy solutions presented themselves. She decided to listen to the conversation.

"—tell you that you can't ignore them," said a visitor. "The Sons of Dixie may seem like just another fringe group to you up here in Toronto, but back home, they command a lot of sympathy—some of it from powerful folks."

The man had a funny way of speaking. He sounded emotional. Mister Michael, to the contrary, spoke calmly and in the proper way.

“I’m not proposing that we ignore them. All I said was that we cannot afford to cater to extremist elements in the Union. The whole political structure is still too fragile, too new. Naturally, for the first decade or so, there’s bound to be a bit of confusion and uneasy integration, as people settle down to a new way of being governed. But we’ve had quite a bit of experience with our own separatist element over in Quebec, and the major lesson we’ve learned is that one must be firm. In fact, I intended to sound out you gentlemen on how your constituency would react to a ban on such groups as the Sons of Dixie.”

There was shocked silence for a moment. Then one of the visitors spoke. “Why, that’s outrageous. It’s—it’s unconstitutional!”

“I’ll have to remind you that the Union no longer functions under that document. New times call for new measures. Unless you can convince me there would be outright revolt, I believe I’m going to propose such a measure to Parliament. No group which advocates the overthrow of the Union—by violent or peaceful means—will be permitted to function.”

Confused grumbles and mutters and chopped-off phrases issued from the visitors. Mister Michael let them babble for a moment, before cutting through their objections.

“Gentlemen, I’m afraid you’ll have to consider it done. Let’s turn to more important matters. The Brazilians are pushing us on the boundary negotiations. Do we want to let them north of Chiapas, or don’t we?”

Little Worker tuned out the unimportant talk. She was more concerned with her delayed meal.

At last Mister Michael, consulting his watch, said, “Well, enough of work. We have a few more days during your stay to discuss such things. I believe you expressed a desire to meet my charming wife. She should be here any moment.”

Everyone waited. Little Worker shifted positions to ease a cramp in her right haunch. Mister Michael’s wife never arrived.

When the visitors had been shown out with many apologies, Mister Michael returned to his seat. He was silent for a time. Then he banged his fist on the desk. “Something has to be done about that woman,” he said. “Something has to be done.”

Little Worker silently agreed.

* * * *

One day not long after this time, Little Worker found herself home alone.

This was highly unusual, for she was seldom separated from Mister Michael. In public or private, Little Worker was always by his side. Even when he traveled abroad, Little Worker went with him. (Little Worker had been to a lot of places with odd names, mostly other cities; aside from a few curious smells here and there, they all seemed alike.) But today Mister Michael was at the doctor's, getting his anti-aging treatment. He had just started the treatments six months ago, when they became available. The location of the doctor's clinic was secret, even from Little Worker. Mister Michael had explained to her that it was for her own protection, so that no one could capture her and force her to reveal where the clinic was. Little Worker had to smile at the thought of anyone capturing her. For one thing, no one ever paid any attention to her. Who would think she knew anything worth knowing? Little Worker felt it would have been all right for her to go with Mister Michael, but he wouldn't hear of it. It was just him and the car, and the car would have its short-term memory wiped clean after the trip.

As for Mister Michael's wife—Little Worker didn't know where she was and didn't really wonder. After the trouble she had caused, Little Worker couldn't have cared what happened to her.

All that mattered was that for the first time in six months—and only the second time since she had become Mister Michael's companion—she was without him.

It made Little Worker very uneasy.

So Little Worker wandered through the big empty house, searching for something to occupy her until Mister Michael should return.

Upstairs, a fleeting impression made her pause outside the door of the bedroom of Mister Michael's wife. Aromas of Bull seeped out to her. Impulsively, Little Worker tried the golden handle of the door. It turned without resistance, and the door opened. Little Worker entered.

The Bull was lying on a couch. He wore nothing but a spandex thong that held his large genitals as in a pouch. He was flipping the pages of a colored picture book. When he heard Little Worker enter, he laid the book on his hard muscled stomach, pictures up. Little Worker could see that the pictures were of matings, illustrating various positions.

"Hello," said Bull. "Do you wish to have sex?"

“No, I do not wish to have sex. I am Little Worker. I do not have sex with anyone. I wish to talk.”

“I can talk.”

“Very good. Would you like something to eat while we talk?”

“Peanut butter is good.”

Little Worker went to an intercom. “Food-center?”

“Yes?”

“Please send a jar of peanut butter to the bedroom of Mister Michael’s wife.”

“With a spoon?”

Bull looked guilty, as if doing something wrong. “No spoon.”

“No spoon,” repeated Little Worker into the intercom.

When the peanut butter arrived, Bull greedily unscrewed the cap and, dipping blunt fingers in, began to eat. Little Worker watched with approval. She knew very well how nice it was to feast on one’s favorite food.

“Do you enjoy making sex with Mister Michael’s wife?”

Bull looked confused. “What do you mean? It is what I do. Sex is sex. Peanut butter is what I enjoy. Am I supposed to enjoy sex also?”

“I do not know. Perhaps you would enjoy it more with someone else.”

“Someone else? I don’t understand. You said you did not wish to have sex with me—”

Little Worker was suddenly inspired. “I am not the only one home.”

“There is another in the house who desires sex?”

“Yes. Would you go to her?”

“I am not supposed to leave this room—”

“You are supposed to provide sex when asked.”

“That is true. You have stated a fact which contradicts the order not to leave the room. What am I to do?”

“I tell you that you may leave this room.”

“Who are you again?”

“Little Worker, Mister Michael’s companion.”

“Then I suppose I must listen to you.”

“Very good. Please come with me.”

“Let me finish this peanut butter first—there. Show me to the one who desires to have sex.”

Little Worker led Bull out into the corridor and up to Mister Michael's bedroom door, which was locked. However, Little Worker knew that code.

Inside, the Lyrical gynomorph was found taking a bath. Amid the welter of sudsy bubbles in the large sunken tub, only her delicate face and one knee were visible.

When the gynomorph saw Bull, her eyes widened and her nostrils flared. Bull developed an immediate erection.

"You are the one who wishes to have sex," said Bull.

"It is my nature."

"Mine also. Is it convenient to have sex in the bath?"

"Yes, it is."

Bull tore off his thong.

Little Worker left the pair of morphs together.

Mister Michael's wife was the first to return home, five hours after Little Worker had arranged the illicit introduction. Soon, she discovered Bull's absence and his current whereabouts. Little Worker watched from the corridor as Mister Michael's wife attempted in vain to separate the two morphs, who had ended up on the floor beside the bed, soaking the carpet with bathwater. Even striking at the pair with the sharp heel of her removed shoe failed to end the coupling. Eventually, special handlers had to be summoned. They too failed to halt the couple's pistoning.

"It's no use, miz, they've developed a destructive feedback loop. We'll have to take them in to be put down."

"Just do it, then!" shouted Mister Michael's wife. "It's disgusting!"

"Yes, miz."

The morphs were loaded still interlocked and bucking into the back of a truck and driven off.

Little Worker was secretly happy.

But within days, Mister Michael's wife had procured a Stallion, while Mister Michael solaced himself with a Moon Moth.

* * * *

Little Worker came awake instantly. She had not been sleeping well lately anyway. Her life had not been right since that long-ago morning of no toast and jelly. (One good thing about the Stallion was that he preferred oatmeal.) Mister Michael was always preoccupied and distant. At times Little Worker

almost resented having to be in constant attendance on him. When she had such feelings, she became violently sick, for the bad thoughts conflicted with her lessons from the Training School. Then she had to remind herself that Mister Michael and his welfare were all her reasons for being.

And now there was noise from downstairs.

There should have been no noise from downstairs. It was the middle of the night. Oh, yes, once there had been noise in the middle of the night from downstairs. Guards from the security booth had come in to check on a possible breach of the perimeter. But it had been only a sensor failure. Perhaps there had been another sensor failure tonight. Little Worker would go see.

She got as far as the head of the marble stairs.

There she confronted four men. The men wore optical- distorting garments and infrared goggles. They carried light-rifles and had other weapons slung from their hips. They were not security men.

“Well, well,” said one intruder. “Lookee here. It’s one o’ them fuckin’ cultivars. I’m gonna blow its head off.”

“Don’t get cocky, son,” said a man who appeared to be their leader. “Just cuz we took out the local boys, don’t mean we can make all the noise we want. No shooting unless I say so. Anyway, maybe this thing can save us some time. You there—where’s the Pee Em sleep?”

Little Worker was not afraid. She carefully considered the terrorists before replying.

“I will show you. But you must collect his wife too, or she might summon help.”

One terrorist whistled softly. Another said, “Shee-it, these vars ain’t got no loyalty at-tall!”

“Okay, Beautiful, lead on.”

Little Worker conducted the men to the bedroom door behind which slept Mister Michael’s wife. They slapped an illegal unscrambler to the lock. The device ran through all the possible combinations in three seconds, and they were in.

Mister Michael’s wife lay sleeping in the arms of the Stallion. The men made various apparently honest grunts of shock, which awoke Mister Michael’s wife and her bedmate.

Soon, she and the Stallion had been herded into Mister Michael's room, where the Prime Minister was found in a similar situation with his new gynomorph.

One of the terrorists flicked on the lights, which seemed unnaturally bright at this forlorn hour. The men removed their goggles and shut off their suits, which had begun to hurt Little Worker's eyes. She was grateful.

The two human captives and their morphs stood shivering in the center of the room, the morphs naked and Mister Michael and his wife in robes. Three of the terrorists seemed calm, but one swiveled his gun nervously from side to side.

Little Worker curled unconcernedly at Mister Michael's feet. She knew that Mister Michael was trying to catch her eye, but she ignored him.

"Who—who are you from?" at last demanded Mister Michael.

"Sons of Dixie, folks. We felt our point of view wasn't reaching the proper ears. So we're aimin' to change things. Ain't that right, boys?"

"You're—you're all wired on something."

"Mebbe so, boss. But that don't prevent us from shooting straight. 'Zact opposite, in fact. So let's just follow orders, if you don't want to get hurt."

"What do you intend?" asked Mister Michael's wife.

"We're taking you 'n' the Pee Em on a little vacation. You'll go free when the gummint listens to us and does somethin'."

A second terrorist spoke. "What about these friggin' vars?"

"Slag those sex toys," said the boss. "Make it quiet though. But save the one that helped us—it might come in handy again."

One of the men unholstered a pistol. Before anyone could react, it spat twice.

Gelatin capsules hit the morphs and burst, releasing lysis catalysts. In under a minute, the two morphs were a single mingled puddle of thick slime, atop which for a minute floated the Moon Moth's tougher gemmed wings.

"Okay, folks—" began the leader.

Unnoticed, Little Worker had slyly extended an arm toward the bare ankle of Mister Michael's wife. Now, she pricked it deeply with a newly unsheathed razored claw.

Mister Michael's wife screamed.

The terrorist with unsteady nerves shot her through the eye.

Before the man’s trigger-finger could relax, or any of the others could tighten theirs, Little Worker moved.

The part of her inheritance that was 30 percent wolverine took over.

The four intruders soon lay dead with their throats torn out, soaking the carpet with their blood where once the Bull and Lyrical had coupled.

Little Worker calmly licked the blood from her lips. She really preferred the taste of jelly. Wetting her palms repeatedly with her tongue, she meticulously cleaned the fur on her face. When she was done, she turned toward Mister Michael.

He had collapsed across the body of his wife and lay sobbing.

Little Worker gently approached. She touched him tenderly. He jumped.

“Mister Michael,” said Little Worker, “everything is all right now.

“You and I are alone.”

FRACTAL PAISLEYS

That night the Li’l bear Inn was as crowded as the last copter out of Saigon.

But the atmosphere was a little more frenzied.

All three pool tables were hidden by tight packs of players and spectators, protruding cues making the whole mass resemble a patchwork porcupine. The dartboards looked like Custer’s troops. Harley Fitts was rocking the pinball machine toward a high score: a sizable task, given that two sisters who called themselves Frick and Frack were perched on it. Rollo Dexadreen was monopolizing the single videogame as usual. Archie Opterix, on kazoo, was accompanying Gig von Beaver—who was making farting noises with a hand under his armpit—in a rendition of “Born To Run.” Kitty Koerner was dancing atop the jukebox, which was playing Hank Williams Junior, though Kitty was doing something that looked like the Watusi.

Above the sounds of clicking pool balls, thwocking darts, ringing bells, exploding aliens, kazoo, farts, Hank Junior, and the bug-zapper hung outside the screen-door that gave onto the gravel parking lot, the calls for drinks were continuous.

“Tracey, two shots!”

“Tracey, another pitcher!”

“Tracey, six rum ’n’ cokes!”

The woman behind the bar—Tracey Thorne-Smith—was on the tall side, and skinny as a book of poems by a sixteen-year-old virgin. She had long straight brown hair and a sociable smile, though her features were overlaid with signs of worry. She wore a white shirt knotted above her navel, and a pair of cheap jeans. Moving like an assembly-line worker with the belt cranked up, the piece-work rate cut in half and the next mortgage payment due, she paused only long enough to wipe the sweat from her forehead now and then.

A weary waitress appeared at one end of the crowded bar, where she set down her tray. She was short and round-faced, and her wavy hair—dyed a color not found in nature—was pinched in a banana-clip, one tendril escaping to hang damply against her cheek.

The bartender moved down to take her order.

“What’ll it be, Catalina?”

“It’s ‘lick it, slam it ’n’ suck it’ time again, Trace. Larry and his city-friends, in the corner there.”

“Four margaritas coming up.”

Catalina leaned gratefully on the bar. “Lord, it’s hot! You think that cheap bastard would get some air-con in here.”

Her back to Catalina, Tracey said, “You best not hold your breath waiting for the Westinghouse van to arrive, Cat. You know well as I do that Larry’s been pinching every penny, so’s he can buy into the syndicate those boys he’s with represent. And something tells me he’s pinched himself a considerable sum, what with the way those lizards are crawling all over him. No, I wouldn’t count on no air-conditioning anytime soon.” Tracey set the salt-rimmed glasses two at a time on Catalina’s tray. “How they tipping tonight?”

The waitress tucked the loose hair behind her ear. “Not bad. But I aim to get a little more out of Larry later, after closing.”

Tracey made a sour face. “I don’t see how you can bring yourself to be nice to him like that.”

“Oh, he’s not that bad. He’s been real lonely since Janice died. It’s downright pathetic sometimes. He keeps telling me, ‘She was my Honeypot, and I was her Li’l Bear.’”

“Eee-yew!”

Primping her hair, Catalina said, “That remark don’t show much sympathy, Tracey, nor much common sense. You should try being nice to Larry, like I do. Might get yourself a little bonus. You sure could use it, I bet, what with Jay Dee being outa work.”

“Forget it! Not only would I never let that man touch me in a million years, but if I did and Jay Dee found out, he’d kill him. Why, he can just about stand me working here as it is.”

Catalina shrugged. “Your call. It’s not like you’re married or nothing.”

After Catalina had sashayed away, Tracey went back to filling the non-stop orders.

She was bending over for a fresh bottle of Scotch when she felt a hand on her rear-end.

“You shore got a nice ass for such a skinny—gack!”

Tracey straightened up and turned around. “Jay Dee,” she said, “turn that poor sucker loose.”

Jay Dee McGhee removed his chokehold from beneath the impulsive patron’s jaw and released the burly man’s wrist, which he had been holding at about jaw-level, only behind the man’s back. Shoving the gagging man away from the bar, he dropped down onto the vacant stool.

“Draw me a Bud, Trace. I had a long hot walk.”

Jay Dee was shaggy and unshaven, with the looks of a mischievous five-year-old, perhaps one just caught affixing a string of firecrackers to a cat’s tail. He wore a green workshirt with the sleeves ripped off and the same K-Mart-brand jeans as his girlfriend. In fact, they were a pair of hers, since the two were much of a size. He had a tattoo on each wiry bicep: on the left was a dagger-pierced, blood-dripping heart with the admonition TAKE IT EASY; on the right was a grinning horned and tailed pitchfork-bearing devil above the legend CLEAN AND SERENE.

Tracey pulled the tap. “You walked all the way from the trailer park?”

After a deep sip, Jay Dee answered, “How else was I supposed to get here? You got the car—not that it’d do me much good anyway—and ain’t nobody we know gonna give me a ride.”

Slopping a dirty rag onto the bar in front of her lover of six months and scrubbing violently, Tracey said, “Only thing is, you weren’t supposed to come here at all.”

“Jesus, Trace, gimme a break! How long can a man sit and watch television? Day and night, night and day! Zap, zap, zap with the damned remote! I’m going outa my head! I hadda get out.”

“But why here? I told you, I get nervous with you around when I’m trying to wait on people. I can’t do my job.”

“It’s a damn good thing I did come, or the next thing you know, that asshole would’ve had your pants off.”

“Don’t make me laugh. I can take care of jerks like that without your help. I got along just fine all those years before I met you.”

“Well, maybe. Though the two black eyes and the busted ribs I seen them tape up at the clinic don’t sound to me like you could take care of anything except getting knocked around.”

Tracey glared. “I told you, Gene was a little too much for me. But you don’t run into someone like him twice in your life. And what do you mean,

you watched the doctor fix me up?”

“Well, it’s true.”

“The janitor at the Lakewood Walk-in Emergency Clinic was allowed to spy on patients?”

“It wasn’t a case of being allowed.”

“Oh, I get it. How many women did you size up, before you settled on me?”

“Well, lessee— Christ, Trace, we’re getting off the track! The plain fact is, I missed you tonight! This routine sucks. With you working till two and sleeping till noon, I hardly get to see you no more. And then I got to rattle around in that tin can like a lone pea.… I’m sick of it!”

Tracey stopped polishing the counter. “I know, I know, Jay Dee. We’re going through a rough time now. But it won’t last forever. I don’t like it anymore than you, but right now we need this job. And if Larry sees you here, after what happened the last time—”

“That fight wasn’t my fault.”

“It don’t matter. He’s still pissed at you. If I didn’t work so good and so cheap, I woulda been fired right then.”

“Well, there’s no law says a man can’t visit his girlfriend at work. Long as I don’t cause no trouble, there’s nothing he can do.”

“This is his joint, Jay Dee, he can do whatever he—look out!”

Holding onto the bar, Jay Dee shoved his stool backward into the crotch of the man he had choked, who grunted and dropped the beer bottle he had been aiming at Jay Dee’s head. While he was still recovering, Jay Dee laid him low with two succinct punches.

“It’s plumb foolish to hold a grudge—” Jay Dee began.

“What in the hell is going on here?”

Larry Livermore was shaped roughly like a traffic-cone, and only marginally taller. Balding, he wore enough cheap gold around his neck to outfit a pawn shop window. He was accoutred in a checked shirt and lime-green trousers. Spotting Jay Dee, he turned to Tracey.

“I warned you about letting this troublemaker in here again, Thorne-Smith. And now he’s made me look bad in front of some important friends, like I can’t even manage my own joint. I don’t need headaches like this.”

Tracey had stepped out from behind the bar. “It won’t happen again, Larry —I promise.”

“I’m sure of it, ’cause I’m canning you now.” Larry reached into his pocket, took out a roll of cash secured with a rubber band, and peeled off a hundred. “Here’s half a week’s pay. Take off.”

Jay Dee moved menacingly toward the squat man. Larry’s mouth opened in shock. “Hey, wait a minute—”

Tracey laid a hand on his shoulder. “No, Jay Dee, it’s not worth it. Let’s go.”

Out in the parking lot, gravel crunched beneath their shoes. They walked silently to their car, a 1972 Plymouth Valiant, more rust than steel, its flaking chrome bumper bearing a sticker that advised ONE DAY AT A TIME. Tracey opened the passenger-side door and slid across the seat to take the wheel. Jay Dee got in after her. When the engine finally caught, they drove off.

Halfway back to the trailer camp, one of them finally spoke.

“You shoulda let me hit him, Trace.”

Tracey swivelled her head angrily, taking her eyes off the dark road. “Hit him! Is that all you know how—”

There was a noise like a hundred-pound sack of flour being dropped on the hood of their car, and the sensation of an impact. Tracey slammed on the brakes.

“Could be a deer,” said Jay Dee without much hope or conviction. “Though life has shown me that bad luck usually comes like an elephant. Namely, in buckets.”

“I—I’ll turn the car around so we can see what we hit.…”

Moving forward slowly, cutting the wheel, Tracey made a three- point turn.

There was a man lying in the middle of the road.

“Oh my god—”

Jay Dee got out.

The victim was a white guy in a business suit that appeared to be made out of rubber, with all the tailoring, including the shirt-front, stamped on. The suit continued onto his feet, forming shoes. He did, however, wear a separate tie patterned with paisleys. Something about the tie drew Jay Dee’s fascinated gaze. Why, the borders of each paisley were formed of little paisleys. And the little paisleys were made of littler paisleys. And those were made up of even littler paisleys! And on, and on, and—

“What’s the matter, Jay Dee?”

Jay Dee shook his head. “Nothing, I guess.… I just felt dizzy, like I was hanging over the edge of a skyscraper.… Hey, look—He’s holding something—”

Prying open the dead man’s hand, Jay Dee removed the object.

The thing squirmed for a moment in Jay Dee’s grip, then settled down to solidity.

At that moment, a wave of shimmering disintegration passed down the man from head to toe. Then the corpse was gone.

“Mo-ther-fuck. …”

Tracey was squeezing his devil with both hands. “This is too spooky for me, Jay Dee. Let’s split.”

A minute later and a mile onward, Tracey asked, “What was in his hand, Jay Dee?”

“‘Pears to be nothing but a goddamn television remote.” Jay Dee made to throw out the window, then stopped. “It’s awfully big though.…”

Tracey made it back to the trailer camp in record time, without encountering any further obstacles. She pulled up alongside their home, an aqua-trimmed sag-roofed aluminum box with the former tenant’s flower garden run to weeds that half hid the two creaky wooden steps braced against the side of the structure.

From the weeds emerged Mister Boots, a large tomcat the color of whole-wheat bread, and with white stockings. He carried a dead mouse proudly in his mouth. Spotting the car, he leaped inside through the open window to devour his feast in the privacy he required.

“Got to learn that cat some manners one of these days.…”

Inside, Tracey went straight for the bottle of vodka above the tiny sink full of dirty dishes. “Lord, I need a drink! I never knew that killing someone would feel like this—even if it was an accident.”

Jay Dee flopped down into a beat-up chair. “Least when you kill someone you do a thorough job of it, Trace. No stiff left behind to clutter up things. Now look, calm down! Who knows what that was we hit? Chances are it wasn’t even human, the way it vanished.”

“I know, I know, that’s what I’ve been telling myself since it happened. But it still leaves a person kinda shaky, you know?”

“Just take a pull and sit down. You’ll feel better in a minute.”

Jay Dee fell to examining the remote control he had taken from the corpse.

The black plastic device was about twice as big as a standard control, with more than the usual number of buttons. It had the usual smoky translucent cap on one end, where the signal would emerge. It bore no brand-name, nor were the buttons labeled.

But as Jay Dee studied it, this changed.

Gold letters appeared on the face of the device, seeming to float up from deep inside the case.

MASTER DIGITAL REMOTE ran the wording across the top of the case. Beneath each button smaller letters spelled out various odd functions.

One button was designated DEMO.

Jay Dee pressed it.

The control spoke.

“Please set me down on a convenient flat surface, pointed away from any objects of value, sentient or otherwise.”

Tracey had her head in the fridge. “You say something, Jay Dee?”

Jay Dee leaned forward and calmly set the unit down on a table, making sure it was pointed at an exterior wall. “No, no, it’s just this here box talking.”

“Ha, ha, that’s funny. Want a baloney sandwich?”

The control continued its speech. “I am a quasi-organic eleven-dimensional valve of Turing degree three. I am capable of modulating the Fredkinian digital substrate of the plenum.”

“Say what?”

The control paused. “Call me a magic lamp.”

Jay Dee got angry. “Hey, I’m not stupid.…”

Tracey approached with a plate of sandwiches. “I never said you were, hon.”

“No, it’s this smart-mouth box. Just ’cause I didn’t understand all the ten-dollar words it threw at me, it started treating me like a kid.”

“I am merely attempting to phrase my function in a manner most intelligible to the listener. There was no slur intended.”

Tracey slowly set the plate down on the corner of Jay Dee’s chair; it tipped, and the sandwiches slid into his lap. He jumped up and they fell to the floor, baloney draping his shoes.

“Perhaps an exhibition of my functions would clarify my nature.…”

“Sh-sure,” said Tracey.

“First, we have ‘smudge.’” A square foot of the wall in front of the talking remote lost all color, all features. It hurt to look at it. “‘Smudge’ simply strips all macroscopic features and quantum properties from an object, reducing it to bare digital substrate, the underlying basis of all creation.”

“Not much use to that,” said Jay Dee.

“You would be surprised. Once an object is smudged, we can use ‘peel’ to lift and superimpose a new set of spacetime characteristics on it. For example.”

Mister Boots, as usual, had gotten in through a broken screen, and was now atop the table with the control. The box suddenly swivelled autonomously and aimed itself at the cat. A small square of fur was somehow peeled off Mister Boots—yet his hide was left intact. The square grew in size, then was lofted through the air like a two-dimensional piece of cloth to be superimposed over the smudge spot, becoming an integral fur patch on the trailer wall.

“Next, we should consider the ‘checkerboard wipe.’ This wipe dissolves any non-living object.” Next to the fur patch, a portion of the wall big as a door flickered in a mosaic of squares, then was gone. The trees behind the trailer could be plainly seen. A breeze blew in.

“‘Motes’ will cause the dissolution of any living substance.”

A cloud of infinitesimal glowing objects suddenly girdled the trunk of one tree. The next second they were gone, as was a clean chunk out of the tree. The upper part of the tree hung for a fraction of second, then began to tip toward the trailer.

Jay Dee and Tracey looked up from their prone position on the floor, Mister Boots between them. The roof of their rented home was buckled in a vee.

“Such minor mishaps can be easily corrected,” said the box. “First, we use checkerboard and motes to dissolve the damaged roof and tree.” The stars looked down on a stunned Tracey and Jay Dee. Mister Boots mewed plaintively “Now, a new function: ‘window.’” A window opened up in the air before their eyes, six inches off the floor. In it was displayed the ornate roof of the First National Bank in town. “Do you like this roof?”

“Yeah, sure, I guess.…”

“Using splinter,’ we reassign its spatial coordinates and reassemble it in the correct place.”

The window flew apart into flying shards, each of which contained its own piece of the original image. The shards expanded and somehow cohered above their heads into the roof of the First National.

The walls of the trailer began to creak under the new weight.

“Quick, Trace, outa here—!”

They were standing by the car. Mister Boots was inside Jay Dee’s shirt, his head emerging from one ripped armhole. The trailer and all their meager possessions were crushed beneath the bank’s stone pediments.

“At least we’re shut of that goddamn box—” began Jay Dee.

A hole opened in the debris by checkerboard wipe. The Master Remote levitated out and floated to land atop the hood of the Valiant.

“I am sorry about the destruction. I was not aware of the flimsy construction of your dwelling. If I was Turing degree four, perhaps I would have had the foresight to examine its parameters, instead of taking your word that the roof was suitable.”

Jay Dee started to make a sharp reply, then stopped. A curious look combining joy, revenge and a wet dream spread over his features.

Tracey grew alarmed. “Jay Dee, are you okay? You look like Saint Paul after the lightning hit him.…”

“I’m fine. In fact, I feel more full of piss than a Portajohn. C’mon, get in the car, Trace.”

Jay Dee grabbed the Master Remote and hustled Tracey behind the wheel.

“Where are we going?” she asked when he was inside.

Mister Boots squirmed out of Jay Dee’s shirt and leaped into the back seat to finish his mouse. “Back to the Li’l Bear. And after that, I think we’ll pay a visit to the First National.”

“Oh. I see. You really think—”

“I sure do. And so do you.”

On the way out of the trailer park, the box said, “I have several more functions. Shall I demonstrate them now?”

“Hold on till we got us a target that deserves it,” said Jay Dee.

There were still three cars in the parking lot of the Li’l Bear Inn, though it was long past closing.

Tracey clicked her nails on the steering wheel. “The Caddy is Larry’s, and the Dodge is Catalina’s. I figure the other must belong to those syndicate guys. What now?”

“I hadn’t counted on this.… But it’s no reason to back down. Let’s check what they’re doing.”

There was one small window into Larry’s office: it was frosted, and six feet off the ground. Light illumined it.

“I think I’ll just make myself a little peephole,” said Jay Dee.

“Why not? You’re good at that.”

Jay Dee started poking at the WIPE button. Nothing happened.

“Why are you doing that?” said the box. “It’s unpleasant. You could simply ask for what you wanted.”

“Why you got buttons then?”

“To conform to your notion of what I am.”

“Oh. Well, drill me a peephole here then.”

A patch of wall dissolved, revealing the back of a file cabinet. In the next second, a square tunnel opened up straight through the cabinet and its contents.

Jay Dee put his eye to the hole. He let out a low whistle.

“What’s going on? Is Cat in there?”

“I expect she’s somewhere in the pile. Unless those good old boys are getting off on each other.”

“How disgusting! That poor thing!”

“I don’t see her putting up much of a fight, nor complaining too loud.”

“You wouldn’t neither if your job depended on it, and you had two kids and no man at home. Quit goggling now, and do something.”

Jay Dee addressed the remote. “Box, you got any way of immobilizing someone in a non-violent fashion?”

“I believe ‘ribbons’ would serve such a purpose. Would you like a demonstration first?”

“Save it for the real thing. Okay, Box, make us a door.”

Studs, wires, insulation and plasterboard, all neatly truncated, formed the edges of the new door. Jay Dee stepped in, Tracey following.

The orgy dissolved in shock into its component naked people.

Larry’s hairy obese stomach was quivering in indignation. “What the fuck —! Thorne-Smith, I’ll have your butt for this!”

“No you won’t, shithead. No way, no how. Box—ribbons on the men!”

Golden ribbons wide as a man’s palm materialized, wrapping themselves around four sets of wrists and ankles before fastening themselves in fancy bows.

“Good job, Box.”

Catalina had gotten to her feet and was trying to assemble her clothing, flustered as a rabbit caught in the open. “Tracey, I don’t understand what’s going on, but you know I always been a good friend of yours, haven’t I? I even tried to talk Larry into giving you your job back. Didn’t I, Larry? Tell her.”

“Shut up, you dumb twat. I’ll bet you were in on this.”

Catalina had both her legs through half her panties and, oblivious, was trying to pull them up. “Larry, no, I swear it!”

The syndicate men had been eyeing Jay Dee coldly throughout. Now one said, “Kid, you’re hash after this.”

Jay Dee assumed a contemplative stance, one hand squeezing his chin. “You know, I don’t like the way you all are talking at me. I think I’ll just do something about it.”

He pointed the remote at Larry’s face and pressed SMUDGE.

Larry’s face was replaced by a blank, eye-boggling surface. The results were so satisfactory to Jay Dee that he repeated the procedure on the other three men.

“Oh my god.…” Catalina dropped her panties and raised both hands in front of her face.

“Come off it, Cat. You know I don’t hurt no women.”

Catalina began to cry. Tracey moved to comfort her. Jay Dee turned to the old-fashioned safe in the corner.

Once the top was gone, the piles of cash were easy to lift out.

“Those appear cumbersome,” offered the remote. “If you wish, you could store them in a ‘cube.’”

“Let’s see.

A silver cube appeared in the air; its lid elevated to reveal its empty interior.

“Where’s it go when it ain’t here?”

“It rolls up along several Planck-level dimensions you can’t sense.”

“Oh. Is that safe?”

“As houses.”

“Good enough.” Jay Dee began tossing the money into the cube. When he had emptied the safe, the remote shut the cube’s lid and it collapsed on itself, dwindling along odd angles.

Tracey stood with her arm around Catalina, who was still sobbing, though less urgently. “Are you done now, Jay Dee?”

“Almost. I think I’d like to say goodbye to Larry. Box, give him back his face.”

“Did you save it?”

“Shucks, I thought you were gonna handle everything.…”

“I cannot read minds.”

“All right, this presents a problem. Lessee.…”

A stuffed moose-head was mounted on the wall. It caught Jay Dee’s eye. He smiled.

“No, Jay Dee, it ain’t natural—”

It was the work of a few seconds to peel off the moose’s features and slap them on Larry’s head.

The beady black eyes of the animal with the fat human body filled with intelligence—of a limited sort. Larry’s head dipped under the unaccustomed weight of his new antlers. His wide wet nostrils flared. His snout opened to reveal a long stropping tongue. A sound midway between a moo and a sob issued forth.

“Larry, I just want to say thanks for Tracey’s back pay for all her hard work, and for the extra compensation for the way you constantly ran her down. It was mighty generous of you. Which is why I done you the return favor of giving you a handsomer face than what you started out with. I predict you are gonna be a big hit with the ladies with that new tongue. It’s been fun, but we gotta go now. C’mon, Trace.…”

Catalina cried out. “Jay Dee, wait! You can’t just leave me here, now that Larry thinks I set him up!”

“That’s true. Okay, you can come with us.”

Tracey asked, “Are you gonna fix up those other guys with new faces?”

“No. It don’t appeal to me.”

On the way out, Jay Dee noticed a Rolex lying amid the discarded clothes of the syndicate men. He grabbed it and slipped it on.

Outside, Catalina, still naked, climbed into the back seat with Mister Boots, who eagerly assumed his rightful place in her lap. With Tracey driving, they roared off.

Jay Dee summoned up his cube full of money, and began to riffle through the bills. He broke open a stack and showered them down on his head. He let out a wild whoop.

“Girls, we got us the gold watch and everything! Let’s see a smile.”

Tracey let amusement break through the sober mien she had been maintaining. “I got to admit, Larry always did remind me more of a bull moose than a bear.”

“You think you could afford to buy a girl a new dress with some of that?” asked Catalina.

“Buy? Why should we buy anything unless we absolutely hafta? Box, show the lady some clothes.”

A window opened up onto the interior of a department store someplace where, judging by the light, it was early morning. The signs in the store were in French. The window onto a sunny world in the middle of the night-darkened car was like a dimensionless television. Catalina’s eyes widened in amazement.

“See anything you like?”

“Um, that blue dress, and those shoes—size six—and that red teddy—”

The window splintered, reforming into the articles of clothing Catalina had named. She managed—with much attractive wiggling of her compact, generously proportioned body—to get dressed.

“Well,” said Tracey, “are we going to the First National now?”

“I don’t see any reason to be greedy, considering that we can reach inside a bank vault anytime we want. No, they’re gonna need all their capital for a new roof. I say we put a few miles between us and our friends and then get us some rest. It’s been a busy night.” A thought occurred to Jay Dee. “Box, can those ribbons be cut?”

“Yes. I was not aware you needed them to be indestructible.”

“No, no, that’s good. I don’t wanna be responsible for killing anyone, even slimeballs like Larry and his buddies. They’ll get loose sooner or later.”

Catalina interrupted. “Jay Dee—exactly what you got there that’s talking to you like that?”

“I don’t purely know, Cat. But it sure is handy.”

An hour’s silent drive onward, the neon of a motel sign caught their eyes.

SEVEN BIRCHES MOTOR COURT
COLOR TV—WEEKLY RATES
VACANCY

“Looks as good as any place else we’re likely to find. Pull in, Trace.”

“None too soon, neither. The road was starting to float up at me.”

“Ain’t it funny,” chirped Catalina. “I’m not sleepy at all! I feel like the night’s still young!”

Tracey grunted, but refrained from comment. Jay Dee assumed a nervous look.

Coasting across a cindered lot, past the sputtering sign, they pulled up next to six long-decaying stumps and under a lone birch tree, its foliage as draggled and dusty as that of a desert palm. Jay Dee and Tracey piled wearily out of the car, while Catalina bounced around, holding Mister Boots, who had his forepaws on her shoulders and was butting his head under her chin.

“Cat, can’t you quiet down?” said Trace. “I’m getting more and more tired just watching you.”

“I can’t help it, I feel wonderful! I’m shed of my horrible job, I got a new dress on, and I’m in the company of two rich friends. What more could I want?”

“Ain’t you worried ’bout your kids?”

“Hell, no! I left ’em with my sister when I went to work, and she knows what to do with ’em if I don’t make it home. I could stash ’em there for months! Cindy’s got six of her own, so two more don’t hardly make a ripple.”

“Well, that’s fine for you. But tonight already I done got my ass grabbed by a drunk, was humiliated in front of a whole room full of people by my boss, who immediately became my ex-boss, smashed my car into a thing from another world—which I apparently killed in some unnatural fashion—had my house come tumbling down around my ears, seen a man turned into a moose, and had to drive sixty miles just to find a place to lay my head down. So you’ll excuse me if I’m not in a mood to party.”

Catalina, crestfallen, stopped pirouetting; Mister Boots turned his head and hissed at his mistress. “Gee, Trace, I was just trying to be cheerful and

show I was grateful for the rescue and the clothes, like.…”

“Well, just stow it till morning, okay?”

Jay Dee stepped conciliatorily between the two women. “Listen, girls, we’re all dead beat. If we gotta have a contest of feminine wills, can’t we get ourselves some sleep first?”

Tracey and Catalina said nothing. Jay Dee took this as assent. “Okay, good. One thing first, though. I wanna do something about this heap of ours. It’s too easy to spot if anyone comes looking for it. Not that I expect Larry to have much luck tracking us down, even if he decides to venture out, looking like he does.”

Pointing the remote at the old Valiant, he smudged it out to a heap of quivering nothingness. Then he peeled off the image of a new Lincoln Continental parked next to the MANAGER’S OFFICE, and superimposed it atop what had been their car.

Two Lincolns, identical down to the license plates, now stood a few yards apart.

Jay Dee laughed. “This is a hundred times better than boosting a car! Ain’t nothing for the owner to report stolen!”

“Don’t you think somebody’s gonna notice something though?” asked Tracey.

“We’ll be gone pretty early. And who compares plates, long as their own aren’t missing?”

They headed to the lighted office.

The clerk was a guy in his early sixties, strands of white hair across a bald spot, crabby face like a clenched fist. He had a full ashtray in front of him and a lit Camel in his hand. Something old, grainy, black, and white filled the small television screen before him, Leo G. Carroll with the sound turned down.

“Two rooms,” said Jay Dee. “Cash up front.”

“You can’t take that mangy animal in, buddy. I ain’t having fleas in my sheets.”

This was the last straw for an exhausted Tracey; she began to weep. “Muh-mister Boots always sleeps with us.…”

“Hold on, Trace, I’ll take care of this.”

Jay Dee raised the remote to point at the clerk, who remained unflustered at the seemingly innocent, though odd threat.

Tracey grabbed his arm. “No!”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake.… All right, look—take this money, pay the man and sign us in. I’ll put Mister Boots in the car for the night.” His back to the clerk, Jay Dee winked broadly at Tracey, as if he knew what he was going to do.

Outside, Jay Dee, carrying the tom, stopped by a parked car. Visible in the back seat was a suitcase. Jay Dee paused, everything now clear.

“Box, save what this cat looks like, then smudge it.”

The remote said, “Done.” Then Jay Dee peeled off the image of the suitcase, which materialized like a wraith outside the car.

“Superimposition of a larger mass-pattern atop a smaller one causes an energy deficit which must be made up from some source,” warned the remote. “I have been handling this automatically, but thought I should mention it.”

“So you mentioned it. Now just turn this cat into some baggage.”

The lights in the parking lot seemed to dim momentarily. Without further delay, the spatio-temporal digital suchness of the suitcase was layered onto the featureless lump of cat.

Jay Dee carried the suitcase back in.

“All set?” he asked.

Tracey held one key, Catalina another.

“Great, let’s go.”

The clerk warned, “Now don’t try sneaking that cat in, ’cause I’ll know it —”

At that moment, the suitcase meowed.

“So, you got it inside there. I thought so. Open it up.”

Jay Dee set the suitcase down, flipped the latches, and sprang the lid.

The inside of the suitcase was lined deeply with fur, top and bottom, side to side; a clawed paw occupied each corner. Mister Boots, apparently none the worse for being turned into a living rug, looked up imploringly from his somewhat flattened skull.

“Meow?”

The clerk’s eyes bulged out rather like Mister Boots’s. He held up his hands as if to ward off an apparition. “Shut it, shut it!”

Jay Dee complied. “Can we go now?”

The clerk nodded violently. He made to reach for a bottle in the desk drawer, then apparently reconsidered.

The cinderblock units were strung out in a line, each sharing two walls with its neighbors.

Tracey and Jay Dee accompanied Catalina inside her room. The ex-waitress seemed to have crashed from her high. “Ain’t it funny—I feel kinda sad now. Scared a little, too. What if Larry and his buddies come after us? I don’t think I could take looking at somebody without a face all by myself, never mind three somebodies. Couldn’t I—couldn’t I share your room?”

“No way, Catalina. Look, we’ll leave the connecting door open. And you can keep Mister Boots for company, since he seems to like you so much.”

“I don’t want no furry suitcase in here.”

“No, we’ll put him back together like his old self.” Jay Dee quickly restored Mister Boots to his saved appearance. The cat rubbed itself happily against their legs, until Catalina reached down to pick it up.

The remote spoke. “Although your strategy worked, it would have made more sense simply to store the animal in a cube, shrink the cube, then open it inside the room.”

“You can put living things inside one of them packages and roll ’em up eleven ways from Sunday without hurting ’em?”

“Yes.”

Jay Dee nodded sagely, as if storing the information away for future use. “Well, goodnight, Cat. See you in the morning.”

In their own room, Jay Dee and Tracey stripped and climbed bone-tired into bed.

Jay Dee awoke. Although it seemed he had been asleep for only five minutes, weak sunlight filtered in around the mishung curtains.

Catalina stood, naked and shadowy in the door.

“It’s morning,” she said.

Jay Dee hissed. “Jesus, Cat, go away—”

“Oh, let the poor girl in.”

“Trace?”

“Shut up and slide over.”

“I really do appreciate this, guys. Guy, I mean.” Catalina giggled. “And girl.”

Mister Boots joined them later, when things had quieted down.

Around noon, when Catalina was in the shower, Jay Dee said, “I don’t know how many more nights like that I can take.”

“Oh, don’t pretend with me. You loved it.”

“No, I ain’t kidding. You’re plenty of woman for me, Trace. Tossing Catalina into the pot is like adding fudge on top of butterscotch. It s just too much sweetness. And Lord, that girl would wear a mule out! No, we got to fix her up with someone fast.”

Tracey came to sit in Jay Dee’s lap. “I’m glad to hear you feel like that, Jay Dee. I don’t mind comforting the poor thing for a while, but I’d hate to think you wanted to make it permanent.”

Jay Dee leered. “Well, maybe we don’t have to exactly rush to find her a man.”

“Jerk!”

At their car, Tracey made to enter by the passenger’s side, out of long habit, till Jay Dee stopped her. He conducted her to the driver’s door and, with mock elegance, opened it for her.

“Why, thank you, sir.”

Seated next to Tracey, Jay Dee looked over his shoulder for Catalina. Missing.

She stood outside the car, waiting patiently.

Jay Dee sighed, got out and opened her door for her.

“Why, thank you kindly, Mister McGhee.”

They had a late breakfast at a truckstop diner named SHECKLEY’S MIRACLE CAFE and discussed their plans.

“Basically, Trace, I see us getting as far away from this crummy state as we can, out to where no one knows nothing about us, and settling down to a life of leisure. A nice big house, some land, maybe even some animals. Nothing too fancy. Swimming pool, maybe. And Cat—we’ll set you up in a similar place, and you can send for your kids.”

Tracey clinked her coffee cup down. “Sounds good to me.”

“Me too,” chimed in Catalina. “You can just fetch me a little old shat-toe from France or someplace and plunk it down next to a private beach.”

“Oh, man, Catalina, get real! Wouldn’t you stick out then like a tick on a bald dog’s butt? You don’t think your neighbors—not to mention the cops, the feds and anyone else you’d care to name—wouldn’t get a little

suspicious when they woke up and saw a house sprung up overnight like a toadstool? No, the safest thing to take is money, and just buy what we want, like any other person who never earned their cash."

"Oh, right. I see."

"So are we agreed that's what we're gonna do? Great. But there's one little personal matter I wanna attend to first."

Tracey looked dubious. "What?"

"Never you mind. You'll see soon enough. Now let's get going."

Out in the parking lot, while Tracey was unlocking the Lincoln, Jay Dee watched the traffic stream past. Toyotas, Fords, Hondas, Saabs, a Cadillac driven by a moose with its antlers sawed off, three faceless men in the backseat—

"Just saw Larry," said Jay Dee, once they were in the car and on the road. "He seemed to be heading for the city."

Tracey pulled into the breakdown lane and stopped. "Let's turn around, Jay Dee."

"'Fraid not. That's where our chore is. Don't worry, nothing's gonna happen. City's a big place."

"I don't feel good about this, Jay Dee, but I know better than to argue with you when you got your mind made up.…"

"You hear that, Cat?"

"Yes, master." The plump woman made a mock bow. "Salami and baloney."

"Hunh."

In the city, Jay Dee directed, "Pick up Fourth at Main and head east."

"The meat-packing district, right? Jay Dee, I never claimed to be a genius, but a person would have to be senile, blind, deaf and have her head up her ass not to be able to figure out your pitiful schemes. You're going after Gene, aren't you?"

"That's right. I reckon we still owe him a little something for all the grief he put you through."

"Give it up, Jay Dee! I learned to. Gene don't mean nothing to me no more, good nor bad. I put all that pain behind me when I met you."

"You are a saint, Trace, and I love you for it. However, it is more in accord with my personal nature to be a little less forgiving. Not only does it require less willpower, but it can be downright satisfying to the soul."

“All right. But if you get your head handed to you, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Jay Dee patted the remote in his pocket. “I think this little equalizer here will prevent such a sad occurrence.”

Catalina, quiet till now, said, “I agree with Jay Dee. It’s not good to bottle up your feelings. Sometimes it’s like trying to put a cork in a volcano.”

Jay Dee snorted. “Good comparison in your case, Cat.”

“Hey, lets keep this conversation above the belt.”

A district of brick warehouses assembled itself around them. Most still retained their old industrial tenants; a few buildings, however, had been vacated and retrofitted for new occupants. On the ground level of one such a sign was hung.

GENE SMITH’S WORLD-CLASS GYM
NAUTILUS, STAIRMASTER, SPARRING
SHOWERS AVAILABLE AT EXTRA COST

They parked in front and got out, leaving Mister Boots meowing aggrievedly in the car.

Jay Dee clutched the remote so tight his knuckles were white as cream cheese.

“If you’re scared, Jay Dee, it’s not too late to leave.”

Jay Dee stiffened right up. “C’mon, we’re going in.”

The gym was a large open space with equipment scattered around the floor, a boxing ring in the middle. Many of the machines were in use. In the ring, two men were sparring.

“One of them Gene?” whispered Cat.

“No,” answered Tracey. “That’s him punching the bag.”

Gene Smith wore only a pair of spandex shorts and some unlaced sneakers. He sported short black curls and an NFL-style mustache. His body looked like that of a gorilla which someone had tried to shave with only partial success. The sound of his bare fists pummelling the bag sounded like a hail of hams striking the roof of a circus tent.

“Oo-whee, he’s a hunk!”

“He’s a pig-ignorant macho shit,” countered Jay Dee. “It just ain’t apparent if you let your hormones do your thinking, like Tracey done.”

“I beg your pardon.”

Gene spotted the visitors. He ceased his flurry of blows and came over to them, massaging one taped hand in the other.

"Well, if it ain't Mrs. Smith. Oh, I forgot. It always hadda be 'Thorne-Smith,' didn't it? I never could knock that crap out of your head."

"Nor never will."

Gene smiled. "I had a feeling you'd be showing up here, after I read about you this morning."

"Read about me?"

"Why, sure, didn't you hear yet? The police got a few questions to ask you, about how the First National roof ended up on top of that dump you were living in."

"Oh, Jesus.…"

"Well, I guess you can hide out with me. Though we'll have to get a few houserules straight first. Hell, I'll even put your buddies up too. Who are they anyhow? Your little brother and his old lady, maybe?"

"Old lady? I ain't nobody's old lady, kiddo."

"And I'm Tracey's man, you asshole. The man you never was."

Gene smiled cruelly. "Is that so? Well, looks like we're gonna need one less place setting than it first appeared."

Cracking his knuckles, Gene advanced on Jay Dee, towering over him like a falling building.

"Hold on a minute—I ain't quite resolved what to do with you yet.…"

"That's okay, baby. I know what to do with you."

"Shit, this is moving too fast— Box, get me a cube!"

A small silver cube appeared in midair behind Gene, who now had one massive fist cocked level with Jay Dee's nose.

"Bigger, bigger!"

The cube expanded to man-size.

"Open it!"

The cube's vertical face swung out. Jay Dee lowered his head and ran forward, ramming Gene in the midriff. Taken by surprise, the big man lurched a couple of steps backward. His calves caught on the sill of the cube and he toppled backwards into its capacious interior.

"Close it up! Quick!"

The cube snapped shut and shrank along eleven dimensions.

From outside the gym came the sound of several car doors slamming. Catalina went to the window to look. When she turned around, her face was drained of blood.

“Its Larry and the smudge-faces. And there’s some other guys—with guns.”

“You told Larry all about Gene, I take it,” said Jay Dee calmly to Tracey.

“A girl’s gotta get some things off her chest, even if the person listening is a jerk.”

“Well, cant change the past. We’ll just have to deal with ’em. Let’s go out, where we can move.”

They opened the door and filed out, hands raised high.

As Jay Dee had seen from a distance, Larry had sawed off his cumbersome antlers. Otherwise, his long and hairy moose’s visage was unaltered, attesting to the permanency of the Master Remote’s changes.

The moose opened his mouth; sometime during the past night Larry had mastered—to a degree—his new vocal apparatus.

“Gib muh back muh faaaace,” he brayed. A long thread of slobber drooled from his jaw with the effort.

“Larry, I’m plumb sorry, but I can’t. The most I could do—if I wanted to—is to give you and your buddies somebody else’s face. But I can’t restore your own familiar ugly puss. But listen, why do you want to change? Before, you were just another mean and undistinguished son of a bitch. Now you’re unique.”

Larry raised a gun and began to squeeze the trigger. One of the new syndicate goons batted his arm down. The bullet ricocheted off the pavement.

“Listen, wiseguy—I don’t know how you done this to Livermore or my bosses, but you better put them right. Or there’ll be big trouble for you and these dumb broads.”

“This is the second time today I’ve been called an insulting name,” complained Catalina. “I don’t like it.”

“Me neither,” said Tracey. “Jay Dee—whatcha gonna do about it?”

Jay Dee lowered one arm to his side and with his free hand scratched his head. “Well, I guess I’ll have to come down on these jerks like a ton of bricks. Box, the cars!”

An enormous shower of bricks fell from nowhere, completely crushing and burying all the syndicate cars, including Larry's prized Cadillac.

For a moment the only sound was the clink of a few tumbling bricks. Then, almost but not quite simultaneously, Jay Dee and the head goon yelled.

"Wall!"

"Shoot!"

A twelve-foot cinderblock barrier topped with razor-wire and including a portion of guard-tower intervened between Jay Dee and the women and the toughs. It ran across the whole street, from building to building. Futile gunfire echoed behind it.

"I borrowed part of the local incarceration facility, as I judged these men were lawbreakers. I hope it is suitable.…"

Jay Dee laughed. "Sure should be an interesting scene at the old exercise yard! Let's go."

In the car the remote said, "I feel I am coming to understand your commands much better. A growing empathy now exists between us."

"I love you too. Okay, Trace, pick up the interstate. We got what we came for. The garbage is in the can. We just gotta figure out the best way to dispose of it."

They were on the outskirts of town when the sirens began to wail. Just as they were pulling onto the entrance ramp to the expressway, a bevy of police cruisers screeched through an intersection and, spotting the Lincoln, converged like pouncing panthers.

"Flower to the spirit," said Tracey enigmatically, before stomping on the accelerator and rocking Catalina, Jay Dee and Mister Boots back into their seats. The big car leaped up the ramp, narrowly missing a tiny Honda bearing a pack of Cub Scouts and Den Mother as it merged into the freeway traffic.

The cops were soon behind them.

Stiff-armed, Captain Tracey whipped the land-cruiser through the crowded sea lanes as her passengers turned green. Cars swerved onto the roads shoulder and collided with Jersey barriers. Still the sirens pursued them, all her maneuvers failing to shake the squad of cop cars.

"Time for tougher tactics," said Jay Dee. "Box, can you make those ribbons like elastics?"

“Would you care to specify the Poisson ratio or the strain/stress dyadics?”

“No, man, I wouldn’t! Just string a big tough elastic band across the road to stop the cops.”

“Done.”

Tracey cautiously slowed. Jay Dee looked back.

A wide golden ribbon bisected the highway, anchored to the median barrier and the roadside fence. As Jay Dee watched, its rubbery surface bulged in the shape of four car noses. Instead of braking, the stubborn drivers continued to race their engines. The belt strained forward, bowing out from its anchor-points.

Realizing they were getting nowhere, the cops lifted their feet from the accelerators.

Released, the band snapped the cars backward. There was the sound of tires shredding and exploding, and the crunch of metal and glass.

“Oo-whee!” wailed Jay Dee. “Just like the slingshot I had when I was a kid!”

“I’m glad you’re having fun,” said Tracey, removing one hand from the wheel and flexing her fingers. “But I do wish you’d learn to drive, Jay Dee, just so we could share moments like this.”

“You know I flunked the road test five times, Trace. I just ain’t got the right skills somehow. But if I was perfect, you couldn’t live with me.”

“You may not believe this, Jay Dee, but I find it hard to live with you sometimes anyhow.”

Catalina spoke. “‘Flower to the spirit?’”

Tracey smiled. “Pedal to the metal.”

They cruised slowly on, laughing and recounting the chase to themselves.

At the next on-ramp, three more cruisers sat with engines purring.

“Shit!”

Tracey got a good lead on them, since they had to accelerate from zero. “Another ribbon, Jay Dee?”

“Variety is the goddamn spice of my life, hon. Box, do you think you can do this…?” Jay Dee whispered with the Master Remote close to his lips.

“Surely.”

The road beneath their rear tires disappeared into a trench with a forty-five-degree slope. The police vehicles went helplessly over the lip and

down. Within seconds there issued forth a loud glutinous plop, a sound between a belch and an underwater fart.

"What's at the bottom?"

"Enough molasses to float a battleship."

"Sweet."

"Do you think," asked Catalina, "they might know by now what our car looks like?"

"Gotcha. Trace, pull over a minute. Great. Box, can you smudge this car with us in it, without smudging us?"

"Your morphic resonances are now locked into my sheldrake chip."

"Uh, good. Go to it."

They were sitting on solid nothing. The windows had gone to impenetrable nothing so that they were blind to the world.

"Jesus, I didn't count on not being able to see.… Box, peel us off a new appearance from what's passing. Something inconspicuous."

The world reappeared. They were sitting in a commercial van. From the rear came a highly suspicious reek, emanating from many canvas drawstringed bags.

Tracey craned her head out her window. "'Blaylock and Powers Diaper Service,'" she reported smugly. "Good going."

"Just drive."

Several times packs of police cars raced past them, oblivious to the laundry van. During these moments, Jay Dee and Catalina hid in the back while Tracey drove.

"Jay Dee, don't the smell of a wet baby just get to you in a certain way? It's so earthy, like. It makes me all quivery inside.…"

"Well, it makes me wanna puke, so keep your hands where they belong."

They passed some cruisers drawn up to the side of the road.

"What's going on, Trace?"

"They're rounding up some escaped prisoners. Maybe we should take out another chunk of important wall someplace, just to keep them busy."

"I'll think on it."

Pretty soon they had crossed the state line. A road sign announced:

JETER'S LAKE STATE RECREATION AREA
CAMPING, BOATING, SKIING

“Jeter’s Lake,” said Tracey wistfully. “I haven’t been there since I was a kid.”

“Last time I was there, I was too pregnant to fit into a swimsuit. Leastwise, any I’d wanna be seen in.”

“Well, hell, let’s stop. I could enjoy some peace and quiet.”

Tracey took the appropriate exit. The secondary road began to curve under arcades of firs. Soft sunlight dappled the van’s interior, and a balsalmy scent began to compete with the odor of a quarter ton of cotton-wrapped, pee-soaked baby shit.

A rustic wooden sign heralded the park’s drive. The entrance fee was three dollars, which they paid to a Smokey-the-Bear-hatted Ranger who regarded their van with frank curiosity.

“On our lunch break,” offered Tracey.

“It’s mighty hard work,” contributed Jay Dee.

“A regular calling, though,” Catalina affirmed.

Down a narrow paved road to a half-empty lot surrounded by forest. Once parked, they eagerly climbed out. Catalina carried Mister Boots.

“Lord, I got to clean out my lungs! Let’s head down to the water.…”

The forest gradually fell away to reveal an extensive body of sparkling water surrounded by tall hills, two of which were partially denuded, their ski trails now grassy, the lifts immobile. A small manmade beach, occupied by a few sunbathers, stretched to left and right; several red-stained log structures held changing rooms, showers, rest rooms, and a small snack bar cum grocery. Beyond the swimming area was a dock occupied by several rowboats, canoes and outboards.

Spying the boats, Tracey said, “Oh, Jay Dee, let’s see if we can rent one. It’d be so nice to be out on the water.”

Beneath the sign that said “Rates: $5/hr, $10 deposit” sat an old codger who looked carved out of an inferior grade of wood. His chair was tipped back, his hat was down over his eyes, and a dead pipe was held firmly between his teeth, indicating, if not life, then at least recent rigor mortis.

“Hey, fella, can we rent a boat?”

The ancient relic slowly raised a hand to lift his cap. He squinted suspiciously at the trio with one eye before declaring, “All taken.”

“All taken? What’re those?”

“Ree-zerved.” He dropped his cap.

“Reserved, huh? No problem.”

Jay Dee took out the Master Remote. “Window.” A square plane appeared in midair. In it was portrayed a posh marina, numerous yachts abob at their berths. “Girls?”

“That one’s cute.”

A sudden wave swept over the shore. Half the boats tethered at the dock capsized and sank. At the end of the pier rode a proud forty-foot yacht, chrome gleaming, wood polished, radar turret aimed at the horizon. It bore the name THE BISHOP’S JAEGERS.

Startled by the commotion, the codger glanced out from beneath his cap. He jerked upright, his chair went out from under him and he toppled backwards.

Luckily, no one was aboard their new vessel; Mister Boots’s prowling through every hatch would surely have aroused them. Quickly mastering the controls, Tracey swung the vessel about, demolishing the dock with elan.

They stopped in the middle of the lake and dropped anchor.

“Now we can relax,” said Jay Dee.

Catalina said, “I want to go swimming, don’t you? But we don’t have suits.”

“So? Go bare-ass. Nobody can see you from the shore, less it’s some birdwatcher with his binoculars.”

Catalina pouted prettily.

“Cat, are you trying to pretend you got any modesty left, after what you ee-nitiated last night?”

“No, it don’t have nothing to do with modesty. It’s just fashion. I like to dress nice, whatever the occasion.”

“Oh, all right. But it’s a waste of energy if you ask me.” A concerned look blossomed on Jay Dee’s features. “Box, your batteries ain’t running low, are they?”

“I have extrinsic sources of power several magnitudes greater than your era’s annual energy budget.”

“Oh, good. Well, let’s see some nice bathing suits for the ladies then.”

Soon Tracey and Catalina were clad in the outfits they had selected, complete down to sunglasses, floppy hats and Grecian sandals laced up

their charming legs. Jay Dee had been convinced to don a pair of flower-print baggy shorts.

"I feel like a goddamn idiot."

"No, you look sharp, Jay Dee."

"Mighty attractive."

Jay Dee smiled. "Well, okay, if you all say so. But I'll look even better underwater, where no one can see these pants. Last one in's a talking moose!"

Jay Dee hurled himself over the side. Tracey and Catalina soon followed.

The trio splashed and stroked until they had had enough exercise and fun. They climbed an aluminum ladder back into the yacht. Below deck, in a luxurious cabin, they stripped off their clammy suits and began to towel themselves off.

"That's a horny ol' devil you got there on your arm, Jay Dee," observed Catalina.

"That ain't his arm you're holding, honey," reminded Tracey.

"So it aint."

An hour or two later, Jay Dee walked out on the deck, alone and clothed. Mister Boots appeared from somewhere and began rubbing against Jay Dee's ankles. Jay Dee hefted the Master Remote with an expression of thoughtfulness on his face. Then he spoke to it.

"Box, what am I gonna do with that Catalina? She needs a steady man something wicked."

"You are a man."

"Not the kind of heavy-duty boyfriend she needs! And besides, I got Tracey."

"What about the man in the cube?"

"Gene? Oh, he's handsome enough, but he's too ornery and spiteful and conceited to wish on the worst bitch, let alone a nice girl like Cat. She did like his looks though.… Nah, forget it! I— Boots! What the hell do you want?"

Mister Boots had stretched up with his forelegs and was using Jay Dee as a scratching post. Jay Dee unhooked his claws and picked him up. "Look, go hang out with Catalina, she loves you—"

Jay Dee stopped dead. A smile big as a slice of watermelon grew on his face.

“Get me the cube with Gene in it,” he ordered.

The cube appeared, hanging six feet off the ground.

“Dump him out.”

Gene Smith fell out of the cube’s missing bottom into a heap on the deck. He appeared quite dazed.

“I could see inside myself…,” he said. “Wherever I was, I could see inside myself. And around the whole world too.”

Gene spotted Jay Dee. “You. You did this to me.” He began to climb to his feet.

“Smudge the cat.”

Mister Boots went formless.

“Peel off Gene and layer him on Mister Boots.”

“Compensating for the extensive mass-difference between origin and target will require my tapping a new source of power.”

“Do it.”

There was something casting a shadow between Jay Dee and the sun. Or so it seemed. He shaded his eyes and looked up.

The sun had a black notch cut into its circumference. Even as Jay Dee watched, the spot disappeared, reconquered by nuclear flames.

Two Genes stood on the deck. The original stopped in his tracks.

“It’s me.… You turned that cat into me! You mother—”

“Smudge him.”

There was a Gene-sized eye-wrenching hole in the air.

“Now put that image of Mister Boots you saved at the motel on him.”

“This is inconvenient. I now have to dispose of extra mass that I could have used in the first transformation. You must learn to sequence your commands more rationally.…”

“Who’s the boss here? Screw rational! Just do it!”

“How shall I dispose of the surplus mass?”

“I don’t care what you do as long as you don’t mess with the sun no more. That’s too spooky. Just dump it somewhere.”

“Very well.” The box paused. “Your planet’s satellite now has a new crater, its largest. Shall I inform the proper authorities, so that you retain the right to name it?”

“No!”

Jay Dee looked at the two other living creatures on the deck.

Mister Boots—wearing Gene's appearance—tentatively raised one hairy muscled arm into his line of sight, then began to lick it.

Gene—on all furry fours—bent his body to look at his hindquarters. He yowled, and launched himself at Jay Dee.

"Ribbons!"

The cat thumped to the deck, neatly packaged. It continued to hiss and spit.

Tracey emerged, rubbing her eyes sleepily. "Jay Dee, what's all this noy —" She froze. "Gene, you're free—"

"It ain't Gene, Trace." Jay Dee explained.

"Oh. My. God. Jay Dee, it's inhuman!"

"Sure. But 'inhuman' just might be what Catalina needs. C'mon, let's introduce 'em."

Tracey and Jay Dee each took one of Mister Boots's arms and walked him forward. The man-cat moved shakily, as if unused to the articulation of its new joints, walking on its tiptoes.

They guided Mister Boots down to the cabin.

Catalina stirred when they entered.

When Mister Boots recognized her, he began to purr. The front of his shorts bulged.

"Jay Dee, Tracey, what—"

"It's Mister Boots, Cat. He needs some petting."

"Nice kitty—oh!"

Tracey and Jay Dee sat in deckchairs, holding hands. The yacht had stopped rocking a few minutes ago. They silently contemplated the sinking sun, apparently none the worse for its loan of energy to Mister Boots. Then Jay Dee spoke.

"You know what, Trace?"

"No, what?"

"Life can be good."

"Sometimes you forget, though."

"'Course we forget. Why shouldn't we, the way we live? People like us, we rush from one bad day to another, never having enough money, usually sick, stuck in dead-end jobs. We're forced by life and society to forget what we were born for."

"To mix men and cats in a blender?"

“You wanna hear my philosophy or not? Okay. No, to have fun! To enjoy ourselves without worrying about where the rent money’s gonna come from. To laugh more than we cry. To relax our nerves and unknot our brains. To help our friends and confound our enemies. And this little box lets us do just that. Why, everybody should have one!”

At that moment, a car bounced down the access road that led to the now-empty beach. It stopped in a spray of sand right at the water’s edge. Among others, a moose-headed man emerged and began to fire his pistol futilely at THE BISHOP’S JAEGERS.

“Well, almost everyone.” Jay Dee got up. “C’mon, Trace, let’s go.”

“Where to?”

“Try the far side of the lake. Seems to me I remember Route 10 passing near there.”

They upped anchor and motored off.

As they drew closer to the far shore, they could make out the highway guard-rail running along the top of the banking raised a few feet above the lake’s surface.

When they were about a hundred yards offshore, sirens began to sound.

Soon the guardrail was lined with squad cars, their roof-lights flashing patriotic colors.

“Shit! If only we wasn’t stuck on this boat! If only we had wheels!”

“Done,” said the remote.

“Wait a minute. That’s wasn’t a real wish—”

“Jay Dee, the ship’s handling funny—”

“You don’t figure— Trace, I got a hunch. Head straight for the shore.”

As the yacht approached the road, more and more of it emerged from the water. But instead of grounding to a halt, its keel embedded in the bottom, it moved steadily forward.

Catalina came up from below.

“Where’s Gene? I mean, Mister Boots?”

“Catnap. What’s going on? Oh, I see.…”

A cop began to yell threats through a bullhorn. He sounded less than sanguine.

Now enormous weed-wrapped wheels, big as those on a monster-truck, showed beneath the boat. Apparently the undercarriage of some large

vehicle had been melded to the yacht and the drive-train integrated with its big engines.

The nose of the ship reared up as its treads bit into the sloping shore. Gripping the wheel, Tracey kept her feet; Jay Dee and Catalina were thrown against the walls of the bridge. Mister Boots—Gene, rather, and still in ribbons—slid back along the deck to thump solidly against the stern.

The monster wheels crushed the guardrail first, then the hood of a cop car. Tracey throttled up to climb the junk. The rear wheels bit solidly. Then they were onto the road.

The land-yacht began to trundle off at approximately twenty-five miles per hour.

Bullets were pinging off the ship's superstructure.

"Shall I give our craft a more conventional appearance?"

"Fuck that! They got me mad now, shooting at us like that, ruining our good times. I want everyone who comes after us stopped permanently. But without hurting them."

"May I recommend a glueball? I use only the highest quality gluons.…"

"Sure, if it'll do the trick."

Inside the Master Remote, a golden sphere materialized, just as the letters on its case once had, a short twenty-four hours ago. But when the sphere reached the surface, it kept on coming, emerging somehow through the intact remote.

Jay Dee held the marble-sized glueball.

"This is gonna stop people from bothering us?"

"Once it is activated, yes, certainly."

"What should I do?"

"Throw it at your pursuers."

Jay Dee leaned cautiously out the bridge and tossed it.

The glueball landed atop a police car.

The car was gone. Or rather, it was plastered flat onto the surface of the glueball, which had swelled to accommodate it. The flat policemen inside the car banged their hands on their windows. One opened his door and emerged to slide around on the surface of the sphere.

The next car to touch the sphere vanished faster than the eye could follow, flattened likewise to the face of the glueball. The ball was bigger than before.

Lacking brakes, Tracey throttled down to nothing. The yacht coasted to a stop.

The glueball occupied the whole road. There were no cars left outside it. They all rolled around its surface like rainbows on a soap bubble.

Now the glueball began to move.

It rolled away from the yacht, toward the city.

Everything it touched—including the road, down to a depth of ten inches—was sucked into it. Trees, guardrail, grass, birds. The sphere swelled and swelled, like a snowball rolling down an alpine slope, leaving a cleanly sheared path of destruction.

"Holy shit.…Stop it!"

"That is beyond my capacities."

"Beyond your— You stupid machine! Why did you let it loose then?"

"I am Turing Degree Three. Humans are Turing Degree Ten."

"Oh, Jesus. Will it ever get full, like, and stop?"

"How big is this planet?"

The glueball was now six stories tall. It seemed to be moving faster.

Catalina was sobbing. "Jay Dee—" began Tracey. But the anguished expression on his face made her stop.

Something appeared in the darkening air above the sphere.

Jay Dee swung the ship's searchlight on it.

It was the man they had run over, the owner of the Master Remote.

Suddenly there were a dozen of him. They formed a ring around the glueball. It stopped. It began to shrink, but did not disgorge what it had eaten.

When it was marble-sized again, all the floating men coalesced into a single individual. He landed on the ground, picked up the glueball and pocketed it.

Then he was on the yacht.

"Uh, sorry we killed you once, Mister Spaceman."

The man brushed some dust off his rubberoid lapels. "I am as human as you, Mister McGhee. I am a resident of your future."

Catalina had ceased crying. "Juh-gee, you must come from pretty far in the future."

"Fifty years," said the man. "But they're going to be wild ones. Now, may I have back my unit?"

Jay Dee surrendered the Master Remote.

Tracey asked, “How come you didn’t arrive one second after you were killed to claim it, and prevent all this mess?”

“The unit disturbs the Fredkin continuum in a chaotic manner. I had a hard time zeroing in on it.”

“What’s going to happen to us?” said Jay Dee.

“Oh, nothing much. Say, did you ever see a tie like this?”

They all stared at the time-traveler’s paisley tie. The border of each paisley was made of little paisleys, and those were made of littler paisleys, and those were made of even littler paisleys, on and on and on, forever—

That night the Li’l Bear Inn was as crowded as the last copter out of Saigon.

But the atmosphere was a little more pleasant.

Above the sounds of clicking pool balls, thwocking darts, ringing bells, exploding aliens, kazoo, farts, Hank Junior, and the bug-zapper hung outside the screen-door that gave onto the gravel parking lot, the calls for drinks were continuous.

“Tracey, two shots!”

“Tracey, another pitcher!”

“Tracey, six rum ’n’ cokes!”

The woman behind the bar smiled at the deluge of orders. It meant more profits in her till.

A man with two tattoos emerged from the back office. “Catalina just called, Trace. She’s stopping by soon as Gene gets off work at the exterminator’s.”

Tracey said, “It’ll be good to see her. I’ll have a frozen daiquiri and a saucer of cream ready.”

The man looked around. “Lord, it’s jumping tonight. We should be able to pay off the mortgage next month.”

A large neutered tomcat stepped fastidiously among the pools of spilled beer. A patron reached down to pet it. It hissed and scratched the offered hand.

“Jay Dee, you should get rid of that mean animal!”

Jay Dee just smiled.

There was a muffled noise from the moosehead mounted on the wall behind the bar. The moosehead had a rope tied around its snout. Its eyes

tracked furiously.

Jay Dee gave Tracey a kiss. “I’ll relieve you in a minute, hon. But I got to do something first.”

He went back into the private office on the far side of the bar, picked up a board—

—and gave Larry another whack on the ass.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

When Ed Ferman purchased this story for *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, he called it one of the funniest he had ever read. That was high praise indeed, although I’m not sure the story sits at the very pinnacle of comic SF. But I think it does capture a Thorne-Smithian ambiance quite well. The Li’l Bear Inn actually exists in Tiverton, Rhode Island. I’ve never dared set foot inside, for fear of ending up on its walls.

THE MILL

1.

Brick dust mottled the still valley air around the noisy scrambling boys, rising and quickly falling like their cries and shouts in thin ragged clouds that puffed from beneath their hands and feet as they clambered clumsily upon the vast irregular pile of broken and discarded bricks. Its dry powdery sunbaked scent—as familiar as the odor of homemade waterwheat bread—filled their nostrils, even as the settling pale orange-red powder layered their dull black clothing, penetrating its very weave and filtering through to veneer their skins with an ineluctable talcum, so that mothers, washing these boys later, would exclaim, “I swear by the Factor’s immortal soul, this brick dust is leaking out from inside you. Why, I wouldn’t be surprised to discover you’re nothing but a human brick yourself!”

But the kettle-filled tub and the scrubbing with smoke-colored sea sponges and the gentle feminine upbraiding would come later, and was not to be worried about now. Now only the mad, ecstatic spirit of competition held sway, raging in their veins like the Swolebourne at flood. On and around the huge tumulus of bricks the boys swarmed, in a single-minded and almost desperate game to reach the top. Hands relinquished their holds to reach for the shirttails of those who surged ahead, to yank them back with savage glee. The boys seemed oblivious to the impact of the corners and edges of the broken blocks on their knees and shins and forearms, intent only on achieving the instant and insurmountable but fleeting glory of standing upon the pinnacle of the heap.

The boys ranged in age from five to just under twelve. No distinction in treatment was made between younger and older, all ages giving and taking equally in the mutual ferocity of the jagged ascent.

Dislodged bricks tumbled down the pile with a resonant clatter, and it seemed as if the pile would soon be leveled before any individual could reach the top. In the next instant, though, one boy emerged above the rest, eluding the outstretched hands that sought to capture him and deny him the top. Bent almost parallel to the slope of the heap he clawed like an animal with hands and boot-shod feet working alike to reach the apex of the mound. Sweat turned the dust upon his face into a crimson paste.

All the boys seemed to realize at once that victory for this upstart was now foregone, all their own chances lost in the sudden burst put on by the boy now nearing the top. Instead of reacting badly, they gave in to their natural inclination to cheer an honest victor, and exhortations and encouragements replaced their wordless exclamations of struggle. “Go it, Cairncross!” “Yay, Charley!” “They can’t stop you now, Charles!”

With the cheers of his peers ringing in his ears, the boy reached the top.

His heart was pounding, and he could hardly see. His white sweat-soaked shirt clung to him like the mantle of a cape-wolf. He feared he might faint, but knew also somehow that he would not. It was not destined for his body, the instrument of his victory, after all, to spoil this moment. Getting his feet precariously under himself, he stood erect atop the crumbling mass, panting, bruised, sweaty, triumphant, and surveyed those below him, who had come to a complete cessation of movement, as if they had finally assumed the earthen nature of the brick they had so long played upon.

For the first time in all the years he had been competing in this brutal, vital, irreplaceable game, he had won. He had won. And there could be only one reason why. Tomorrow he turned twelve. When you turned twelve you entered the Mill to work. You played on the bricks no more. This had been his last chance ever to stand here, in unique and poignant relation to his fellows. And he had been granted the privilege. Through some unseen intervention of God or Factor, unwonted energy and determination had flooded his limbs, urging him on to the top, where now he stood with shaky knees. He had won.

For the next twenty years this moment would be the highlight, the indescribable epiphanic summation and measure of Charley Cairncross’s life. Neither his first kiss from his betrothed nor commendation from his superiors; neither the birth of his children nor the praise of the Factor himself would equal this heartbreaking moment.

Moved by a premonition of what this moment meant, under the impulse of forces he could neither identify nor control, Charley, risking a tumble and cracked skull, began to jig and prance, whooping and yelling in a giddy crazy dance atop the bricks, unimpeded by his heavy leather shoes, like a fur-faced South Polar savage gloating over the skulls of his vanquished enemies. The boys below Charley watched in fascination, as the skinny lad

flailed his arms and legs about. No one had ever done this before, and they were utterly baffled, but at the same time respectful.

There was no telling how long Charley might have continued his victory dance, had not noontime intervened. From some distance away came the loud tolling of a big bell, echoed up and down the Valley by remoter cousins. Its brazen strokes pealed out, shattering both Charley's visionary state and the hypnotic trance of his audience. Immediately boys began to descend the heap of rubble, brushing futilely at their clothes.

Charley, recovering from his ecstasy, looked up at the cloudless summer heavens. Several kites and cliff kestrels glided lazily in the depths of the aquamarine heavens. The enormous blue- white sun was directly overhead. Noontime indeed, and lunch still had to be delivered, despite the unique and magnificent events of the day. Not even for transcendence—*especially* not for transcendence—could the routine of Mill and Valley come to a halt.

Lowering his center of gravity so as not to topple, Charley crabbed backwards down the pile. By the time he reached the ground, all the other boys had already vanished among the houses not far off. Charley hastened after them.

The brick dump lay on the outskirts of Charley's village, just beyond the outermost houses. In neat, garden-broken ranks the brick bungalows marched alongside the Mill with geometric precision. They clustered familiarly together, despite the abundance of open space in the Valley, as if making a united front against the mystery of the world around them.

By tradition, the master masons of Charley's village for centuries had dumped their waste here, on the last bit of level cleared ground before the land became wooded and began to slope up, forming the eastern side of the Valley. All the subsequent decades of weathering and decomposition had permeated the original soil with the sterile runoff from the pile, rendering it mostly fruitless. Among the trailing tendrils of discarded brick grew only the hardiest weeds. Sourpeas, their gaudy spring flowers only a memory now, their poisonous yellow pods harvested occasionally as an emetic; dangletrap, its jaws snapping softly on the odd insect; maidenhair, its black tendrils lying wispily atop red shards.… A foot-beaten path, trod by generations of boys, led back to the houses.

Halfway across the waste, the path was intersected at a right angle by a twin-rutted dirt road with a thin grassy median. The road, like the

Swolebourne, like the Mill itself, ran north and south, leading in the latter direction down the length of the Valley to where the Swolebourne emerged from its human-made brick shell. Here, new construction was always going on.

Once among the shadows of the somber brick dwellings—each two stories tall and divided by an interior wall so as to house two separate families, whose compact and well-tended garden plots flanked each proud owner's door, serving in lieu of useless grassy lawn—Charley speeded up his pace. He knew his mother would be waiting for him. More importantly, so would his father.

On the paths threading the village, Charley passed many boys bent on errands identical to his. They had already been home, however, and now raced by carrying tight-lidded tin pails that they swung by their handles, and stone bottles stoppered with ceramic plugs and wire caps, and suspended from twine knotted around the bottlenecks. The stone bottles were slick with condensation, their contents cool from all-morning immersion in the family wells.

Soon Charley reached the doorstep of his house, indistinguishable from all the rest and yet so deeply and immutably known by him as his. A woman with plaited honey-colored hair stood impatiently in the doorway, tapping a foot beneath her long baize skirts and holding his father's lunchpail and beer crock. The left corner of her lips twitched the big dark beauty spot above it in a familiar gesture of annoyance.

His mother cut off Charley's attempted explanation of his lateness and disheveled condition. "No excuses, boy. Just get your Da's meal to him before it gets cold." Without even stopping, Charley grabbed the pail and bottle and took off.

Down the narrow cindered lanes—which had just lately dried completely after the final spring rains—Charley raced, his tough leather-soled high-topped shoes crunching the grit as if it were rock candy. Eventually he caught up with the other boys, who had not been so far ahead of him after all, and who—by an unconscious and daily urge to gregariousness, as if they were determined to offset now the future semi-isolation they would endure when tending their machines in the Mill—had funneled together from their various starting points and subsequently moved in a jubilant pack through the last shadowy stretch of serried houses. Occasionally a pail

would bang up clumsily against one of its mates, eliciting dull clunks and anxious belligerent warnings to “watch out for my Da’s dup, you dodder!” Some boys carried two or more pails, for both brothers and father.

Sighting Charley, many of the boys whooped out fresh congratulations for his recent performance on the brick heap. Several of them mimicked his celebratory dance, infusing it with an absurdity he had surely not felt. Had he really looked so foolish? Or was it the perceptions of his friends that was distorting the reality of what he had experienced? Not for the first time, Charley felt distanced from the other boys. He wondered whether anything as intense as what he had just experienced could ever be truly communicated or understood.…

At last the boys burst out from the maternal embrace of the houses, leaving behind shadow for diamond-hard translucent sunlight that fell sharply on a wide swath of wildflower-spotted, untamed emerald field that stretched away to the Mill. The cindered path continued across this intermediate zone between home and work, heading toward the immense brick structure that was the Mill.

The Mill was ungraspable from this vantage in its entirety, looking merely like a high endless madder-dark windowless wall capped by a mansard roof whose expanse of thick slates looked like the spine of some unknown beast. It stretched to right and left as far as one could see, dividing the Valley like a ruler laid across a bear-anthill. Its majestic presence was so much a given, so taken for granted, that the boys truly did not even really see it. Their attention was focused on meeting their fathers.

The boys moved on through the fragrant waist-high unscythed grass, spreading apart a bit, some stopping to investigate a flower or insect, then having to run to rejoin the rest. In a minute or so they had crossed this interzone and entered upon the territory of the Mill proper. Here, as at the brick heap, the ground was bare of anything but the most tenacious and hardy of weeds, due to the accumulation of generations’ worth of waste oil. The smell from the organic detritus—Charley had once heard that the oil came from a special kind of plant that did not grow hereabouts—was dense but not overpoweringly unpleasant, especially to those who had lived with its smell engrained in the creases of their fathers’ rough hands ever since those selfsame hands had first reached to absent-mindedly stroke the new babe in its cradle. The air here smelled rather like slightly rancid fried food.

Charley and the others hurried across this oily waste toward an opening in the Mill's flank. A wide double-doored portal of thick planks, this entrance was marked by the rising of a clocktower up from the roofline above its location, and also by a heterogenous collection of backless benches scattered around just beyond the entrance. Above the benches, the gilded hands of the clock hung at ten past the hour, scything inexorably toward the inevitable return to work. Under their stern progress, the benches were already filling up with sweaty, hungry, brawny, tired-looking men, and many of their older sons, looking like shrunken or as yet uninflated replicas of their sires.

When the lunch-carriers saw their relatives waiting they picked up their feet even more fleetly and began to cry out like a flock of particularly limited birds. "Da! Da! Da! Da!" The men and workerboys perked up, hearing these youthful voices and knowing their meals had arrived. More and more laborers—those who worked farther inside the depths of the Mill and so had farther to walk for lunch—continued to pour out of the doors.

Straggling alongside Charley in the rear was poor Jemmy Candletree. The boy had six or seven pails to lug. His mother, a widower, supported herself and Jemmy by supplying meals to childless and unmarried men.

Charley silently took one of Jemmy's pails; the lad smiled gratefully.

On the far side of the Mill, Charley knew, this same scene was being mirrored. It gave him a curious sense of twinness to think about it.

Now the lead boys had begun to circulate among the men, handing out the lunchpails and stone jugs they had ferried from hearth to hand. The men assumed a certain dignity with the arrival of these tin vessels and crocks. Each set his shoulders back somewhat more stiffly beneath his coarse jacket (donned in the morning upon departure, doffed once inside the Mill to allow shirt-sleeved freedom, and re-donned at lunch), as if to say, "My wife and oldest homeson have both done their part once again. Let all see and note this." Then they fell to disassembling their tripartite pails. A twist unlocked the first section from the second. Removal of the top lid, which was balanced carefully on the knee throughout the meal, always revealed inside this first container an enormous slab of dense waterwheat bread smeared with orange butter, nearly a quarter of a loaf. The container below this held the main course: a hot, fragrant stew of rocklamb and capers, say, or two groatgoat chops, or some kind of meatloaf redolent of greennut shavings.

The final sealed container held dessert. Berry cobbler, stuntapple pie, spicebark cookies.

The sounds of restrained but hearty eating filled the summer air. The men were as yet too intent on sating their Mill-born hunger to engage in conversation.

Charley shuffled from foot to foot, awaiting the arrival of his father, who worked in roving, some distance away. He examined the lone pail he now carried while he waited. His father's initials—RC—were awkwardly engraved on cover and bottom. The alphabetic furrows in the tin held ineradicable dirt from a thousand handlings, which, scrub as she would with boar-bristle brush, his mother could never totally remove.

Suddenly, without warning, Charley experienced a revelation. Tomorrow, he would not be carrying this pail. That task would fall to his little brother, Alan, whose small hands would have to manage two lunches. He—Charley—would have his own lunch-pail. Already it must have been bought at the Company Store, and even this minute was probably sitting on a shelf in the kitchen. Tonight he would have to scratch his initials on it. CC. Tomorrow he would be sitting here with his father, probably famished and more tired than he had ever been before. No more eating at home with his mother and Alan and Floy.…

CC. See, see. See, see what would come.

It was all too strange for Charley to really fathom. How could he travel from his temporary yet eternal enshrinement atop the brick heap to the interior depths of the Mill in less than a day? It seemed impossible.…

Charley lifted his gaze once more to the door. His father was coming through.

For one brief moment, as the man became visible just within the tenebrous interior of the Mill and yet had not fully emerged, he was dusted with light. All over his bare skin and clothing danced tiny motes and atomies of radiance. He looked dipped in some marvelous powder that did not reflect light, but created it, engendered it of its own miraculous being and nature. Charley's father wore, for the briefest second, a chatoyant suit of fireflies. It was, of course, only a coating of the airborne fibrous lux particles that were everywhere within the Mill. And as soon as the man came completely into the sun-drenched outside air his suit of lights

disappeared, leaving him clothed like the others, in drab utilitarian fustian weave.

Charley ran to his father and handed over his pail and beer crock. The man nodded wordlessly, tousled Charley's brown hair, and moved to an empty spot on a bench. He dropped wearily down, as if his bones were lead. The inner containers soon ranged along his leg as on a serving board, Roger Cairncross dug out a spoon from his pocket, polished it on his sleeve (thereby probably depositing as many particles on it as he removed) and began to eat, shoveling stew beneath his droopy mustache like a man filling a ditch.

Normally Charley would have rejoined his peers in their roughhousing as they waited for the empty pails, which they had to bring home. But today, he wasn't quite sure who his peers were. So he hung quietly by his father's elbow while the man and his comrades ate, not venturing to speak.

His father seemed not to mind. At least he did not gruffly order Charley to move off. Perhaps he too recognized the in-between nature of the day and of Charley's state of mind. At last, with a final swipe of his bread through the remnant gravy, the elder Cairncross was done. He packed up the assemblage of containers neatly and handed them back to Charley. He brought a pipe out from within his jacket, filled it with smokeweed and began to puff. His fellows were doing likewise, down almost to the youngest. Charley coughed as the acrid smoke reached his nostrils. He vowed then and there never to acquire so inexplicably vile a habit.

The lofty clock-hands stood at half-past the hour. The first man to speak addressed not his fellows so much as the air in front of him.

"I hear that the new mill is nigh finished."

It was a kind of unmistakable intonation that differentiated "mill" from "Mill." The latter word, of course, referred to the whole vast multiunit complex that stretched from the northern end of the Valley more than three-quarters of the way to the south, a distance of nearly five miles. Big-em "Mill" meant more than the building and its contents and products, too. It stood for some numinous ideal, a community that included everyone in the Valley, something larger than any individual, and deserving of the ultimate loyalty. Something that stretched ultimately to the stars.

With a more familiar and less respectful tone, "mill" meant literally the individual production units that made up the Mill. Each small-em "mill"

was a collection of men and machines capable of taking the raw lux fibers and producing finished cloth. These mills commanded a more earthly loyalty, a certain fierce pride in the ability of one's mill to outproduce all the others in quantity and quality, and to field a ball team that would win the annual championship. Each mill was approximately twenty years older than the contiguous one immediately to the south of it.

Charley's mill was not the oldest, nor the youngest, being situated somewhat toward the middle of the whole complex. The youngest mill was still under construction. The oldest was a desolate mass of charred timbers overgrown with bramblevines and fronded at their bases with waterplants through which the Swolebourne rushed at the start of its channeled and tamed subterranean passage beneath the Mill. This progenitor mill had caught fire and burned down in a time beyond Charley's conceptions, when there had been only three mills. Now there were fifteen. "Many mills make the Mill" was a saying often trotted out when one wished to indicate that there was strength in numbers, or diversity beneath a common facade.

"Aye, that's what I hear also," said another man. "And we all knows what that means. A new flood of dodders in from the farms, looking for an easy life. Probably some hellacious towners who've gotten one too many gal in trouble and been drummed out. A trapper or three who's getting too old to walk his lines anymore. Well, they'll soon learn. They all settle down to Mill life after a while. I reckon we was all dodders back somewhen."

The men all nodded agreeably at the old wisdom. They knew that after a decade or two the workers at the new mill would be indistinguishable, save for perhaps a slight accent, from those who had lived in the Valley all their lives.

"They'll not be any challenge in the games at first," said a man with a missing arm. "Especially not to the Blue Devils." Everyone smiled at the mention of their own team, as they pictured the frenetic sweaty pleasure of summer twilight games, kicking and passing the scarred lucky leather ball until the moon and stars themselves were inveigled out to watch. It seemed then that the remainder of the talk would center on the upcoming season's games. But Charley's father—who had been frowning and staring down into the oily dirt since the first mention of the new mill—diverted the talk with a blustery outburst.

"And why do we even need a new mill, I ask you?"

All the men turned their eyes on Cairncross. Charley felt nervous, worried and defiant for his father's sake, all three emotions jumbled up together.

"Ain't life hard enough," Cairncross continued, "trying to produce the best goods we can, so's that the Factor will give us a rich weight of gold that will guarantee a fair share for every worker, enough to tide us through the year between his Lord High Muckamuck's visits?"

Cairncross stopped for breath, glaring intently at the others, who appeared not a little frightened at this mild derogation of the Factor. "Now we've got a new set of competitors, more mouths to divide the Factor's beneficence among. Unless the Factor ups the yardage he's willing to purchase, well all owe the Company Store our very breaths by the time the new mill is geared up to full production."

An older man spoke up. "The Factor must know what he's doing, Roger." (Here the elder Cairncross mumbled something that only Charley seemed to hear: "He's only human.") "He told us nigh twenty years ago to start building the new mill. He must understand his market, wherever he sells the luxcloth, out there among the stars. Could be he's expecting a big surge of new customers, and needs the new production. You're too young, but I remember when the last mill started up, almost forty years ago. People were saying the same thing back then. And look, we still earn a good living."

Cairncross spat. "Aye, a good living, if you call it fair that the sweat of a man and his sons goes for naught but to survive until he dies—and dies too young most times at that—with not an hour or an ounce of energy left for anything but a game of ball. Think what the Factor could do for us and our world if he wished—"

Now the men laughed. Charley winced for his father's sake.

"Sure," said one, "he could make us all deathless like hisself and we'd all fly through the air all day and live on moonbeams and calculate how many angels fly 'tween here and the stars. Away with your stuff, Roger! It's enough for any man to make the cloth and raise his bairns and tussle on the game fields. That's life for our kind, not some airy-fairy dream."

It seemed that Cairncross wanted to say more, but, feeling the massed attitudes of his fellows ranked against him, he only stood, pivoted and stalked off back into the mill. The subsequent banter about ballplaying was muted and desultory, under the pall raised by Cairncross's wild talk, and the

men soon shuffled back into the mill, a few unprecedented minutes before the tolling of the bell that signalled the end of their break.

The boys stood amid the benches for a time after the men had gone, idly picking at the weather-splintered bleached wood of the seats or kicking greasy clods of soil. Their mood seemed touched by the dispute that had arisen among the men. A few boys looked curiously but not accusingly at Charley, as if he somehow could explain or account for his father's untenable position.

Charley could do no such thing. He was too confused by his father's arguments to explicate them. He had never seen his father act precisely like this before, or spout such unconventional ideas—although there had been times, of course, when his father was quietly sullen or explosively touchy; whose father wasn't?—and he wondered if his own near-future entry into the Mill had anything to do with his father's novel mood. Charley returned the boys' glances boldly (some of his exaltation at conquering the brick heap still lingered like a nimbus around and inside him) and soon they looked away. A few seconds later, their natural exuberance had returned and they raced off back across the flowery strip, toward home and an afternoon's boisterous roistering.

Charley did not follow. He still felt too confused to abide by his regular schedule of mindless afternoon gameplaying. He had to go off somewhere by himself, to think about things. Swinging his father's empty pail and jug by their handles of tin and twine, keeping to the strip of waste-sown ground, Charley headed north, the serpentine bulk of the Mill on his left, the massed and brooding houses on his right. When he passed the northernmost house belonging to his own village, with the southernmost houses of the neighboring village still some distance off, he turned east, away from the Mill, across the trackless meadows. The hay-scented, sun-hot layer of air above the chest-high grass was filled with darting midges, the way he imagined the lux-thick air in the Mill to be filled with lux. Charley batted them aside when they swarmed annoyingly about his face.

The land began to slope up: houses fell away, behind, below, to south and north. Slender sapodilla saplings, advance scouts for the forest ahead and uphill, made their appearance in random clumps. Jacarandas and loblollies began to appear. As tree-cast, hard-edged shade blots started to overlap, the grass grew shorter and sparser. The final flowers to remain were the delicate

yet hardy lacewings. Eventually, under the full-grown trees, the composition of the floor changed to leafduff and gnarly roots, evergreen needles and pink-spotted mushrooms. Small rills purled downhill at intervals, chuckling in simple-minded complacency, bringing their singly insignificant but jointly meaningful contributions to the Swolebourne.

"It takes many mills to make the Mill.…"

Charley labored up the eastern slope of the Valley, not looking back. The air was cooler under the tall trees, insects less prevalent. Only the isolated thumb-thick bark beetle winged like a noisy sling-shot stone from tree to tree.

In the arboreal somnolence, so reminiscent of Layday services, with the buzzing of the beetles standing in for the droning of Pastor Purbeck, Charley tried to sift through the events of the morning, from his triumph on the brick pile to the confusing conversation among the men. There seemed to be no pattern to the events, no scheme into which he could fit both his joy and his bafflement. So he gave up and tried just to enjoy the hike. At last he came out upon the ridge that marked the border of the Valley, the terminator between familiar and foreign.

Here, high up, there were bald patches among the trees, places where the rocky vertebrae of the hill poked through its skin of topsoil. Walking south along the ridge, Charley came out of the trees into such a spot. Sun-baked stone made the air waver with heat ripples. It felt good after the relative coolness under the trees, like snuggling under the blankets warmed by heated bricks on a midwinter's night.

Setting his father's lunchpail down on the grass, Charley climbed upon a big knobby irregular boulder, got his feet beneath him (no one contested this perch with him), and looked around, away from his home. The crowns of the nearest trees were far enough downslope to afford a spectacular vista.

Beyond the Valley, unknown lands stretched green and far to the east, ending in a misty horizon. Sun shouted off a meandering river. Charley suspected it was the Swolebourne on its post-Valley trek, but was not sure. There was no immediate sign of man to be seen, but Charley knew that somewhere a day or so away there were towns and villages and cities and farms, where shoes and meat and the harvested lux came from, in tall-wheeled, barrel-loaded wagons drawn by drowsy wainwalkers, their horns spanning wider than a man's reach. Those places were too unreal to hold

Charley’s interest. He was Valley born. Back toward the rift that held his world he turned.

He could see the entire length of the Valley from this vantage. It was an impressive spectacle. In the north, the Swolebourne tumbled in high frothy falls from over the lip that closed that end of the Valley. There was a legend that claimed that a whole tribe of aborigines had hurled themselves from this precipice to their mass suicide, rather than submit to the presence of the first human colonists. The mournful chortling which at times could be discerned under the falls’ roar was said to be their ghostly lament, and did indeed resemble the noises which the fur-faced natives made, according to those trappers who had actually penetrated to the current-day haunts of the abos.

From its creamy violent pool the river rushed down its man- modified channel, its energy for some small distance untapped by the machinery of the Mill.

Soon enough the water ran among the blackened beams and crumbled fragments of walls that could barely be discerned at this distance and which betokened the original mill that had long ago gone to its destruction as the result of some careless use of fire, a danger each child was warned against daily. The brawling river vanished next beneath the first still-functioning mill, through masonry arches. A gentle susurrus from river and Mill machinery filled the Valley.

Funny, thought Charley, how you only noticed some things when they were remote.… Charley’s eyes followed in one quick swoop the variegated length of the Mill, each of its sections distinguishable by the subtle and unique coloration of its bricks: generational shades of rose, tawny, pumpkin, autumnal leaf. He let his eyes bounce back from the southern end, where the Swolebourne emerged, a pitiful tamed remnant of its upstream proud valorous self, and where the minute figures of hired out-Valley laborers could be seen finishing the upper courses of the new mill.

Starting with the oldest section, Charley recited aloud all the familiar and comforting names of the Mill.

“Silent Sea Warriors, Swift Sparrows, Deeproot Willows, Wild Wainwalkers, South Polar Savages, Red Stalkers, Factor’s Favorites, Longarmed Bruisers, Blue Devils, Lux Jackets, Eighteyed Scorpions, Landfish, Ringtails, Greencats, Blackwater Geysers.”

This litany of mill names was vastly reassuring, a bastion of every child's daily talk and boasting, source of endless speculation and comparison, during winter idleness and summer game-fever.

Suddenly Charley wondered what the new, sixteenth mill would call their team. How strange it would be to have a new name associated with the other time-hallowed ones. Would such a thing ever happen again in his lifetime, or was this the last mill that would ever be built? It was all up to the Factor, of course, and his motives were beyond fathoming.

Charley's attention turned to the houses that paralleled the Mill on both its eastern and western sides. A village consisted of the families on both sides of the individual mills. Each section had its mirror-image dwelling places bunched together opposite each other, with the Mill itself intervening. There was a single corridor that ran straight through the width of each mill permitting access over the river and between halves of a village. This corridor had no doors into the mill proper; that privilege of entry was denied both women and underage children.

Gaps—playing fields fringed by wildness—separated each mill's housing from the rest on the same side, contributing to the team feeling and individual minor differences that marked each small subcommunity.

Charley tried to imagine what life would be like in another community. He felt an uncommon sorrow for girls who had to move out of the villages of their birth if they married a man from another section. Would such a thing happen to his sister Floy? He hoped not, for he would miss her.

Thoughts of Floy made him want to see her, and so he clambered down off his rock, retrieved the lunchpail, and began his descent to the Valley floor. He guessed he felt better for his walk. He chose to disregard his father's bitter talk about the Mill. The Mill was the only life Charley desired. He wanted to enter more deeply and completely into its ritual-filled activities and complexly articulated duties, not to examine or criticize them. He would not let tomorrow—the day that marked his first steps into such a life—be spoiled.

Back down in the Valley, Charley rushed home. He burst into his house, swinging his father's lunchpail just like he had seen the men swing their lanterns as they walked in front of the wagons at night that carried people back from far-off games down one end of the Valley or another. He found his mother, Alan, and Floy all in the same room. Alan was playing with a

set of wooden blocks while Floy, sitting in a chair, was having her hair braided by her mother. Floy was inordinately proud of having the same honey- colored tresses as her mother, and wore her traditional plaits proudly. Such elaborate, time-consuming hairstyles were a mark of status in the village, showing that mothers could afford to spare time from housekeeping and cooking and washing, and there were few women who would deny their rare daughters such attention.

"Where have you been?" asked Charley's mother first thing. Her voice, while somewhat stern, was also shot through with a kind of maternal concern the likes of which Charley had never quite heard before. Was this change, too, connected with his upcoming transformation?

"Oh, for a walk," Charley said. "I didn't feel like being with the other boys today."

Charley's mother said nothing, but continued to weave her fingers among Floy's rich hair. Charley grabbed a waterwheat biscuit, sat and munched and watched until the task was done.

"All right, Florence," said her mother. "You may go out now if you wish. But be back in before the bell tolls three, since I need you to baste the roast."

Floy stood, her head with its coiled grandeur held high, and Charley grabbed her hand. Alan got to his feet and tried to follow them, but before Charley could deny him, their mother caught up the younger boy, saying, "And you come with me, mister, for there're peas to be shelled."

Charley and Floy left the house, heedless of Alan's shrill protests.

Outside they meandered down the narrow, close-graveled streets. Odors of cooking drifted from each open window, along with household noises: the clatter of pewterware, the clink of glasses.

Holding his sister's hand as he always did on their walks, Charley felt an unlooked-for estrangement in place of the comfort he had expected. Floy looked somehow older and different to him today, inexplicably more mature than her fifteen years. Her starched white ruffled shirtfront seemed more like his mother's bosom than the flat expanse of linen he remembered from yesterday. Could so much have changed in a single day, or was it just his senses playing tricks? The changes left Charley feeling tongue-tied. Finally, he ventured an observation on the matter closest to his heart.

"Tomorrow I enter the Mill, Floy."

“I know,” said Floy rather blandly. She seemed distant from Charley today, more intent on casting her gaze about as if for witnesses to her coiffed glory.

Charley was discomfited. “Well, will you miss me?”

Floy favored her brother with a look of impatience. “I’ll still be seeing you each night, won’t I? You’ll hardly be getting married yet, I think.”

Charley felt frustrated. “No, of course I shan’t. You know I don’t mean any such thing. But I will be gone all day with Da, and we won’t be able to talk and play for hours as we used to, nor take our lessons together. Will you still think of me, when I’m in the Mill? What will you do all day with yourself? That baby Alan can’t take my place, can he?”

“No,” said Floy in a somewhat absent-minded manner, as her attention was distracted by the sight of showoff Hal Blackburn chinning himself on the branch of a pear tree. Blackburn was inordinately large for his age, and his biceps bulged as he pumped himself up and down. Charley found his leering expression distasteful.

“I don’t know quite what I’ll do,” continued Floy. She released her brother’s hand and primped at her hair. Blackburn switched to a one-handed grip and began to hoot and scratch at himself like a purple vervet. Floy turned away from him in a huff. “I suppose I’ll find something, though.”

This was not the protestation of undying grief that Charley had been longing for and, in truth, half expecting to hear from Floy (he had even, he admitted, pictured tears), but he supposed it would have to do, and he sought to find some solace in it.

They promenaded among the houses in silence for the rest of their final afternoon together, each preoccupied with his or her own thoughts. When it was time for Floy to help with supper, Charley went and sat on their stoop, awaiting his father. The man returned at last after six. He had been gone since seven that morning. He looked utterly vanquished, and barely noticed Charley as he brushed past him.

After supper, his father sat on the wainwalkerhide chair (still owed for at the Company Store) that was reserved for him alone and silently smoked his pipe. The children played quietly, and their mother darned clothing. Buttery light from the oil lamps flowed over forms and faces, furniture and floor.

After a time, their father spoke. “That blasted Otterness was on my back all day. Claimed I wrongfully mixed two incompatible luminances on my machine. Ever since he made Master Luminary he’s been unbearable. At forty he’s the youngest ever, and if you imagine hell once let you forget it, then you’d believe the Lux Jackets could take the championship.”

Charley’s mother said nothing, realizing that attentive silent agreement was all that her husband wanted at the moment. The man smoked in silence for a full two minutes before speaking again.

“I tried telling them today what I believed, Eliza, and they did naught but laugh.”

Charley’s mother put down her work. “You know no one likes to hear bad things said about the Factor, Rog. I don’t know why you even bother.”

Charley’s father slapped the arm of his chair. “Damn it, it’s not even as if I’m proposing anything other than that the Factor leave us alone. If he won’t share the knowledge of his starways with us, at least he should take his superior self away, and let us try to find our own path again. As it stands now, he’s like a dam across the stream of our progress. There’s been naught new done since the Factor came all those centuries ago. Things were different then, and could be once more. We were picking ourselves up from the Dark Times, learning what we could do again. Then came the Factor, and knocked the spirit right out of us. Since then we’ve stagnated. It’s not healthy, I say. No more than if the Swolebourne were motionless and covered with pond scum.”

Shaking her head, Charley’s mother said only, “I don’t know, Rog. I can’t say. Life seems good.”

Charley’s father puffed furiously on his pipe, but said no more.

As Charley lay in bed that night he puzzled over his father’s words, but could make no sense of them before he fell deeply asleep. That night he had no dreams, not of his triumph atop the brick heap, nor of the day to come.

And in the morning he got up and had a breakfast of porridge with his father and he saw his lunchpail sitting beside his father’s on the shelf and he realized he had forgotten to cut his initials into it and would have to do so later and he set out into the dewy morning beside his Da down a familiar path that looked utterly strange and soon he was across the oily waste and among the clot of men and boys, some mingling and joking and some silent, and intricate odors were wafting out of the open Mill doors at him and the

line of men was moving forward and beyond the doors his light-adjusted eyes could not penetrate the darkness and as each man or boy entered—save Charley alone—his clothing sparked with lux and before Charley knew it he had stepped over the threshold inside.

2.

The pale gray leaves of the dusty-miller tree diffused a scent like minty talcum. The branches of the dusty were long and slender, withes useful in basketry, and arced and drooped to form a secret bower around the bole. From some distance off, fatwood torches spiked into the turf on the sidelines of the playing field cast their wavering illumination over the ghostly foliage, sending shadows skittering over the tapestry of leaves without penetrating the deeper darkness of the arboreal shelter. The shouts of the spectators clustered around the sides of the game field rose and fell in linkage with the action of the players, the one an enthusiastic reciprocal of the other. Panting and grunting accompanied the fervent play, intermixed with the solid thump of shoe leather making contact with a scarred leather ball. The game was in its final quarter, and the Blue Devils were battling to maintain their one- point lead over the Landfish.

Inside the canopy of leaves Florence Cairncross leaned in a swoon against the rough trunk of the dusty. The familiar odor of its leaves filled her head with a piquant strangeness. Everything was so much altered.… The excited voices of her friends and neighbors and family sounded like the inhuman cries of birds or animals. The light of the torches seemed to issue from watery depths, as if drowned beneath the Swolebourne. An exclamation from one of the players reached through the tangle of leaves. “Pass it, pass it!” Was that her brother, Charley, calling? Perhaps … It was so hard to tell; his voice had changed over the last year, maturing into a novel male roughness. And under present circumstances.…

Florence felt a tugging at the laces of her camisole. Her starched outer shirtfront already gaped apart, one bone button missing, lost amidst the dead leaves of past seasons which bestrewed the ground at her feet. The fingers at her laces suddenly found the simple knot that secured the top of her undergarment, found its trailing end, pulled and undid it. Those same fingers poked through the crisscrossed laces halfway down her midriff and

tugged. The lace-ends slid through the double-stitched eyelets as easily as water through a sieve.

She could see nothing in the tenebrous enclosure, but closed her eyes anyway.

Those fingers.… How was it possible for a grown man to have such skin, unscarred by machinery, untainted by the stink of lux and oil? Despite his maturity, they were still so smooth and uncallused, almost as smooth as a girl's. That had been one of the first things she had noticed about Samuel.…

* * * *

The game that Layday had been scheduled for noon, to allow time for morning services. A night game during the workweek would have involved too much travel for the Blue Devils, who had promised to give their fledgling opponents the advantage of their home field. Although the actinic sun was high, the game had not yet begun, for heavy rains the previous day had washed away the chalk lines of the playing field, and the men were still busy demarcating the borders of their eventual struggle. Under a spreading horsetail tree there was the usual broad trestle table set up with food and drink. Big stone jugs of pear-apple cider, both hard and soft; pies and loaves; cheeses and hams. People crowded around the refreshments, chattering. A bit more than half the faces were familiar. The new village was still underpopulated, all its houses and outbuildings still raw-looking, and the visitors, although representing only a portion of Florence's community, actually outnumbered their hosts. This was the first engagement between the Devils and the Tarcats, as the newest mill had denominated their team, the first time the two villages—one long-established, the other barely settled—had had a chance to mingle.

Beyond the village the Valley mouth opened out onto misty blue-green horizons, the hills on either side sloping away into the flat plains like tendons disappearing into the torso of the earth. It was the closest Florence had ever been to the Valley's embouchure, and its nearness made her giddy.

Talking with her best friend, Mabel Tench, one of the few village girls her own age, Florence reached for the handle of a cider jug at the same time the stranger did. His soft palm fell atop hers, engulfing it in a strong yet velvet grip. Florence felt the blood rush to her cheeks.

She turned her face to the stranger, who had yet to release her hand. His eyes were as blue as gillyflowers, his smooth jaw as strong as the rocks from which the Swolebourne tumbled. He was dressed in a ball-playing outfit: a jersey striped with his team's colors—green and gold—and leather shorts. His legs were well muscled and very hairy. Florence felt her flush deepen.

"Please excuse me, Miss," said the man, his words accented strangely. "Mere thirst is no excuse for inconveniencing such a beauty as yourself. Allow me to fill your mug for you."

Finally he released her captive hand. Hooking the big jug's handle with his forefinger, he somehow swung it neatly up into the crook of his arm without spilling a drop. Relieving Florence of her mug, he poured a golden stream of tart juice into it, then handed it back. At that moment one of the man's teammates called him. "Snooker, the game's about to start!"

The man set the jug down, made a little mock bow, then trotted off to join his team on the field.

Florence winced a little at the name. Could such an elegant fellow really answer to "Snooker?" She felt a twinge of proprietary anger, then caught herself. What connection existed between them that could give her the right to even worry about such things? Quite obviously, nothing. Nor would there ever be. Most likely.…

Through innocent questioning Florence discovered that the stranger was named Samuel Spurwink. Along with several other villagers he had relocated from distant, cosmopolitan Tarrytown. She found one of his townsmen standing on the sidelines, a short older man with a brown beard thick as thatch.

"That fellow who just scored a moment ago. He plays quite well."

"Snooker Spurwink? Aye, I suppose so. If you fancy a style where you dart about like a drunken hummingbird, stopping to ogle every petticoat on the marge. Oh, he's a sly one, that Spurwink. More used to indoor sports, if you take my meaning. Bending an elbow, letting fly a dart."

Florence felt irked at the man's denigration of Spurwink. "If he's such an idle tosspot, then what made him come to the Valley? Although our work is noble and much esteemed, as bringing honor from the Factor to our humble world, we don't have an easy life here, turning raw lux to fine cloth. I can't

see a figure such as you paint voluntarily abandoning all the pleasures of town for our strictured Mill life."

"Well, you see, young Sammy had quite a surfeit of working in his Da's butcher shop. Blood-covered aprons clashed with his finery, it seems. And then there was talk about Sammy and the Mayor's wife— Say, young lady, just how old are you?"

Florence huffed. "Old enough to know not to listen to idle gossip." She moved off, leaving the man chuckling to himself.

During the game Florence found herself cheering the Tarcats—and especially Spurwink. Her parents and fellow villagers smiled indulgently at her. "Such a good girl, to make these newcomers feel welcome to the Valley, even with her own brother out there playing his heart out."

The Tarcats lost to the Blue Devils, ten to one.

But Spurwink that day won something invisible.

* * * *

His lips were on her neck now, and she swivelled her head to expose more of that graceful expanse to his nuzzling. Her laboriously fashioned plaits, pinned atop her head with blue-bone clips, rubbed against the tree and came loose, falling to frame her face. Then his hand was inside her undone camisole, molding itself to her breast, cupping the fruit of her flesh as he had cupped her hand only a short month ago. He smelled of spicy cologne. Florence had never known a man to wear scent before. His signature smell mingled with the perfume of the dusty-miller leaves in a heady blend.

His kisses stopped at the base of her throat. "Oh, Sam, lower—" He complied, while the crowd roared a million miles away.

The second time they met had been at a night game between the Devils and the Red Stalkers, the latter a team upstream of the Devils. Spurwink had materialized at her side as she stood apart from and on the outer edge of the spectators. From behind he had covered her eyes and whispered, "Hello, Miss Pretty Puss. Can you guess who this is?"

She was both surprised and unsurprised to have him there. On one level she had had no thoughts of him, her thoughts drifting among the minutiae of her daily life. On another, deeper level, she had somehow known he would come. In that first moment her surprise and consternation weighed

slightly heavier in the balance of her emotions, and she hesitated before speaking.

“Come now, don’t you have a pleasant word for a man who’s labored like a dog all day, then walked an hour to be by your side?”

“I—I’m flattered.”

Spurwink uncovered her eyes and twirled her around to face him. No one was looking, collective attention massed on the game. “Then show it,” he said, and kissed her on the lips.

Florence pushed Spurwink back, both hands on his hard chest. When he was at arm’s length, however, she did not remove her palms from his shirt.

“You play rather fast and familiar, sir.”

“Have you never heard that fortune favors the bold?”

“In some endeavors, perhaps, but not all”

“It remains my universal motto nonetheless.”

“An intriguing steadfastness. Would you care to explain more?”

“By all means. But let’s meander to quieter pastures.”

“If you wish.”

They walked away from the crowd and the torchlight, the trodden night-damp grass exuding its living breath. Spurwink attempted to press his hip to Florence’s, but she skipped away. He sighed melodramatically. She ignored him. He began to talk.

Spurwink’s exotic speech, his foreign tones, his barely concealed insinuations, all combined to fill Florence’s head with dreamy visions, colored in all the brilliant shades of the rainbow missing from the drab black and brick-red environment of the Mill. His words seemed to pass directly from his lips into her imagination, with barely a stop to be interpreted by her conscious mind. Her familiar surroundings disappeared, to be replaced by peacock images of sprightly dances, airy pavilions, candle-lit canopied bedchambers.…

Florence had come to a stop by a stand of jojoba shrubs. Spurwink advanced, backing her up into their prickly embrace. He clasped her face in his hands and kissed her again. Florence did not resist.

“Floy! Floy! Game’s over! Time to head home!”

It was her foolish little brother Charley calling, shattering the spell she had been in. Florence pushed Spurwink back, rearranging her skirts where the shrubs had rucked them up.

“Factor’s ballocks! This damn Mill schedule makes sleepy larks of us all, willy-nilly! If we were back in Tarrytown, we’d watch the sun come up and glint off the wine bottles we’d emptied. But here, you have to be abed by nine just to rest up for the next day’s drudgery.” Spurwink’s tone became tinged with self-pity. “And I’ve got an hour’s walk ahead of me yet.”

Hastening toward her parents, Florence called back, “Next week we play the Landfish. They’re only three mills up from you.”

Spurwink fell back into his gallantry. “If it were three hundred damn mills, I’d still come for you.”

The desire in the man’s voice made her stumble on nothing. She reached her parents still flustered, but they were too elated with the Blue Devils’ victory over the Stalkers to take much notice. Charley, however, recognized enough amiss to ask her if she was feeling well.

Florence felt an immense condescending superiority toward her brother. She tousled his sweaty hair and said, “I’m fine, Charley. It’s nothing you’d understand anyway.”

Charley regarded her quizzically. For one brief moment his eyes widened, and she was convinced he knew. Then he turned away wordlessly and mounted into the bed of the wagon for the journey home. Ridiculous, she thought, to imagine such a thing.…

And the third time she and Spurwink had met—that time was now.

Spurwink’s left hand still plumped her right breast. The soft fabric of her camisole felt stiff as burlap on that nipple, so sensitive was it. His mouth ringed the summit of her other breast. His right hand was on her belly, stroking it in circles that grew wider and wider, like the ripples cast from a stone thrown into one of the Mill’s many holding ponds. She felt as if her belly were filled with hot coals, like a bedwarmer on a winter’s night. Eventually Spurwink’s lower hand strayed deliberately beneath the waistband of her skirts. More cunning and experienced this time in the fashions of the Valley, it quickly found the ribbon that upheld her petticoats.

Florence started, and laid a hand atop Spurwink’s cloth-covered one.

“Do you really want to stop now, Pretty Puss?” he whispered, relinquishing her breast, yet with his breath still hot upon it. “Tell the truth now.”

“I—I don’t know.”

“Well, you must realize I don’t. Not with a Factor’s Paradise so near for both of us.”

“Then—do what you will.…”

He tugged the knot apart. Then, with both hands beneath her clothes, he pushed her single undergarment down, his smooth hands sliding over her rump and hips. The cloth fell from beneath her skirts to lie with the generations of dry dead dusty leaves, a presage of the autumn to come, so seemingly impossible at summer’s height.

Without being told, she stepped out of her knickers.

Florence lost a moment then. The next thing she knew she lay on her back on the ground, her skirts pooled around her, Spurwink’s muscled weight atop her, his mass centered below her waist. It took a moment for a strange sensation to register. Spurwink had removed his wool trousers and was now bare also.

“I think you’ll like this, my poppet.”

Florence faltered. “I want— I want—” What did she want? In the end she could not say, and lamely concluded, “I want to.”

“And you will, you will.…”

When it was over Spurwink fell asleep for a minute or two on the duffy turf. Florence lay awake staring up into the branches of the dusty-miller tree. Judging by the roar of the crowd, the ball game was reaching some kind of climax. She put both hands between her legs and closed her wet thighs on them. What had she done? She could not feel sad about it, but neither did she feel ecstatic. The moment’s brief rapture had vanished, elusive as morning mist on the Swolebourne, whose waters seemed to flow now from her center.…

Spurwink awoke with a startled grunt. “Oh my aching bones. What time is it? By the stars, girl, you were good! I’d fancy another ride if it weren’t so late. But duty calls, and I must hie homeward.” Climbing to his feet, Spurwink fumbled with his trousers in the darkness.

Florence remained on the ground. A coldness crept into her flesh. “When shall we meet again, Samuel?”

Spurwink replied airily. “Oh, at one game or another, I’m sure.”

“That hardly seems such an enduring pledge as you were uttering earlier.”

“I’m afraid it will have to do, my lass. If there’s one thing I cannot abide, it’s to be trussed up like one of the rocklambs in my father’s abattoir. You

must take me as you find me."

Florence used the tree trunk to climb somewhat painfully to her feet. Without stopping to alter one iota of her disheveled appearance she marched out of the bower and toward the game field.

"Wait, wait," Spurwink called nervously, attempting to maintain a discreet tone. "Make yourself presentable first, girl."

Florence gave no reply, but strode steadily on.

Spurwink lost all self-assurance. "Stop, you little idiot! What do you think you're doing?"

Widening the gap between them, Florence paid no heed to Spurwink's orders. He darted a few steps after her, thought better of it, then ran off in the opposite direction.

Florence marched toward the Blue Devil and Landfish villagers, who had as yet taken no notice of her. Half of her mind was all icy cold precision and a determination not to feel anything. That was the half that showed on her face. The other part was a mix of bewilderment, pain and confusion. That was the part that huddled and mewled deep inside like a lost unweaned tarkitten.

Above her head the stars Spurwink had invoked to praise her shone with a frigid radiance. Were there truly men out there, humans who bought the luxcloth? Men like Spurwink? It seemed all too possible. Were they watching her now? Their powers were unknowable. The ten bright stars that formed the constellation Factor's Ship seemed to glare with a particular accusation.

Once she stumbled. This time, however, the cause was not excitement, but only a rodent hole hidden in the grass.

The game had ended when Florence came up to the crowd. The players were leaving the field, victors triumphant, losers consoling each other and boasting of success in the eventual rematch. The spectators had broken up into congratulatory clusters around their various relatives. Florence crossed the perimeter of torchlight and stumbled blindly into their midst, her skirts aslant across her hips, her breasts shamelessly exposed.

There was a moment of stunned silence. Then everyone was hovering about her, the men loudly blustering with outrage and moral indignation, the women all practical earnest solicitude, various children watching wide-eyed. Everyone was trying to get her to speak. Florence opened her mouth,

but nothing came out. Somehow all she could focus on was the face of a little girl hanging onto her mother's skirts. Had she ever been that young herself?

Someone tossed a blanket around her shoulders, covering her nakedness. Then her parents were there. Her mother held Alan, the youngest, on her hip. She rushed up to Florence and tried to hug her. But she forgot to put Alan down, and ended up awkwardly embracing both her children. Charley was somehow beside her next. To Florence, he looked inexplicably taller than earlier in the night, as if his exertions on the field had stretched and matured him. He clutched her hand and stroked her hair. "There, Floy, there," was all he said, but somehow it was enough to start her tears flowing.

Roger Cairncross was shouting into the night, at no one and everyone. "Who knows anything about this! Speak up! Speak up, damn you!"

When he received no reply he turned to his daughter and gripped her by the shoulders. "Who did this, girl! Do you know? Are you protecting him?"

Her father's mustache was laced with spittle. His face was red as clover. Florence dropped her eyes from his. When she did this, he began to shake her back and forth with a violence that rattled her bones.

"Trollop! Tart! Is this how you were brought up? Is this what I work for from sunup to sundown? I'll have his name out of you if I have to beat it out!"

Charley was pulling his father away. The older man shrugged him violently off. Then other villagers, his coworkers, were on him, separating him from Florence.

"Can't you see she's in shock, man? She needs to get home and be cared for, not abused. Your daughter's a fine lass, she'll come round. Just give her some time."

Cairncross began to calm down. "And what of the bastard who touched her?"

"He can't leave the Valley without giving himself away. There's no out for him. Don't you see?"

Cairncross nodded in agreement. "All right then, let's get home."

In the homeward-bound wagon Florence sat shivering in a corner, wrapped in the borrowed blanket, her head in her mother's lap. Every few minutes the musty-smelling wain walker pulling the vehicle would emit a

plaintive bellow, as if to complain about being kept up so late. She recalled all the festive rides back to their familiar village, how she had sung and laughed with her friends. Would there ever be such days again? She began softly to sob. Why couldn't she speak? A slow anger began to smolder in her. Why should she have to speak? Couldn't they leave her alone until she had sorted everything out for herself? What right did they have to pester her with questions? The more she thought of this, the angrier she got. By the time they reached their village, Florence had ceased her sobbing. She now wore an expression of stony indifference.

The wagon stopped outside the Cairncross home. Their neighbor—a middle-aged bachelor who supported a widowed father who had grown too frail to work in the Mill—emerged from his half of the house to stare and cluck his tongue with a mixture of sympathy and reproof. Averting her face, Florence let herself be helped inside.

Once in the parlor, Florence spoke for the first time since she had left Spurwink. "I want to wash up, please."

"Well, by the Factor's grace, you've found your tongue," said her father somewhat sarcastically. "Maybe now well learn the cause of you bringing so much shame upon our family."

Florence said nothing, but merely went to her room. Her mother soon brought a white basin and a pitcher full of water heated on the wood stove, some towels and a washcloth. When she was alone, Florence used the chamber pot, then scrubbed herself free of Spurwink's detestable scent. She dressed in gown, robe, and slippers trimmed in bluefox fur around the ankles. She knew now that she would never say anything about what had happened that night, come what may.

Back in the parlor, Florence sat on the couch, the center of her family's baffled looks. Gently at first, then, as she refused to answer any of his questions, more and more roughly, her father tried to elicit what had happened from her. Florence maintained her silence throughout all her father's cajoling and threats, his attempts at logic and reason, his appeals to honor, duty and affection. Her mother's pleas also she ignored. As the night wore on, Roger Cairncross grew more and more irrational. Several times he gestured as if to strike her. At last he did, bringing his open palm across her face.

Florence took the blow without uttering a sound. A wild look of despair and self-disgust flashed across her father's face. He jumped to his feet and fled the house.

Charley had sat through this cross-examination silently, offering neither consolation nor accusation. Now he arose also and left.

Soon her father returned. With him was Pastor Purbeck.

Pastor Purbeck had lost an arm to the Mill's machinery at age twelve, some fifty years ago. That same year had seen the demise of Pastor Topseed's youthful catechumen, a boy named Hayflick who had fallen prey to a pack of dire wolves forced down from their mountain fastness by an unusually hard winter. Young Purbeck, barely recovered from his wound and the equally traumatic surgery, had been immediately compelled by his family—a disreputable group led by a drunkard father and a termagant mother—to take his devotional vows. Shortly thereafter his family left the Valley. Upon the death of Pastor Topseed some ten years later, Purbeck had become the Valley's youngest cleric.

Purbeck lived now in the one-room rectory attached to the Blue Devil chapel, a building on the far side of the Mill from the Cairncross home. He was tall and thin, and bore a good-sized wen at the hinge of his jaw. His eyes fairly radiated his devotion to the religion symbolized in the icon of the Factor hung on a chain around his neck. These features, combined with his empty right sleeve, formed a presence capable of frightening even grown men. More than one poor child, hurrying through the cresset-lit windowless tunnel through the Mill's body, rushing from one square of light to another, had had the wits startled out of him by being abruptly grabbed on the shoulder by the single hand of Pastor Purbeck and questioned on elements of his catechism.

In the homey atmosphere of the Cairncross parlor Pastor Purbeck lost none of his imposing sternness. Florence shivered upon seeing him, recalling no specific incident but only the general air the Pastor had always carried, an air of suspecting everyone of guilt and sin. Tonight, she feared, she merited his suspicions.

Purbeck took off his wide-brimmed cleric's hat. Then he sat on a footstool directly opposite Florence. He rested the hat on one bony knee. He flicked some luxdust from it with a contemplative slowness. He lifted the silver figure of the Factor on its chain to his lips and kissed it. Then he raised his

gaze to Florence. She braced for a flood of accusations and threats of damnation.

Purbeck's voice was soft and flat. "Ah, young Florence, it seems only yesterday to me that you were being consecrated into the faith. Such a pretty little girl you were. But even then rather willful. I remember when you joined the choir. 'Why must I sing with all these others?' you asked. 'I prefer to sing alone.' I found it amusing at the time, and so I let you have a solo part that Lay- day. Do you remember the song, Florence? I do. It was 'Our Hearts Shine Like Lux in the Factor's Sight.' A lovely piece. Written over a hundred years ago by Holsapple. And your voice was equally lovely, dear. So sweet and piercing, such a contrast to all those massed tenors and basses. You were guaranteed a solo every Layday afterwards. Such beauty, I thought, could only serve to glorify the Factor."

The Pastor paused a moment, turning his hard eyes ceilingward before fixing Florence with them again. "But now I reproach myself for my vanity, as well as for yours. For what good is beauty without the soul behind it? It is like putting stucco on the Mill. Underneath would still be the brick. And when the heats of summer and the chills of winter—the trials of life, if you will—had flaked all the plaster off, the brick would once more be exposed. Yet my analogy is imperfect. In the case of the Mill, we would not be ashamed to see the noble, homely brick, the true substance of our days. But in your case, my dear, we are all of us ashamed to see what lies beneath your lovely exterior."

Now the Pastor's voice began to modulate into those tones it assumed just prior to the inevitable moment when he would bring his single fist down on the pulpit. "Your beautiful exterior, my dear, is cracking. You have let it be mishandled and mauled, and now your soul is starting to show through. And what a sorry sight it is! Its lineaments are those of greed, selfishness, impetuosity, and stubbornness. You have revealed yourself to lack a sense of gratitude to your parents, of duty to your village, of devotion to the Factor. You have revealed yourself to be a thoughtless, reckless, immature little girl. And to compound your errors, you refuse now even to make amends for your sin by disclosing the name of your partner."

Leaning forward, Purbeck took hold of one of Florence's hands. She tried not to flinch, but failed to repress a slight movement. The Pastor did not comment on this, but instead launched onto a different tack.

“Do you think, my dear, that your partner will turn himself in and save you performing what you wrongly regard as a betrayal? If so, you must disabuse yourself of such a notion immediately. Although it pains me to say it, there are few men in this Valley who would move a little finger to save a woman’s virtue. But that is the sad fact of a male’s composition. That is why a man is bound by natural law to support his family—if he is lucky enough to have one—by the sweat of his brow all his days. That is why the Factor made a disproportionate number of men. They are expendable and imperfect.

“But a woman, dear Florence, a woman is different. They are so few and so rare, that their natures cannot help but be more refined and heavenly. It is woman who perpetuates our race on this sad world. When a girlchild is born—so rarely, only one to every two boys—we rejoice. All her youth she is cosseted and petted, perhaps made too much of. But we cannot help it, for we see in her a visible sign of the Factor’s grace, proof that although he has made life hard, he has not made it impossible. It is woman who must act as the conscience of our race, the moral light. So you see, all the burden of resolving this affair must devolve to you.”

Florence’s mother was crying; her father was tugging thoughtfully at one end of his mustache and nodding, as if to acknowledge his own male unworthiness. Pastor Purbeck gave her hand an extra squeeze and eyed her hopefully. Florence looked at all of them in disbelief. Then she yanked her hand away and shot to her feet.

“I won’t have it! I won’t be part of it, do you hear! Special! Holy! Duty and honor! That’s all I’ve heard all my life! Why, I’d rather work in the Mill thirty hours a day than spend one minute as the kind of creature you paint. But you won’t have a woman in there. ‘Too dangerous, too coarse,’ you say. ‘Stay home and have babies, lots and lots of babies!’ For what? So that they can live out their tiny constricted lives in this narrow Valley, bowing and scraping before the Factor? Why should I raise more little slaves for him? Ask my father’s opinion of the Factor, if you want to hear something that makes sense. No, I’ll go to my grave unwed, I swear it!”

Pastor Purbeck dropped to his knees, crushing his hat in the process. “This is close to blasphemy, girl. Much worse than mere fornication. I am going to pray for your soul now. Let those who would, join me.”

Florence's mother got down on the floor, then Roger Cairncross too, more reluctantly. They were bowing their heads when Charley came in.

"Get up," he said. "Get up, all of you. There's no need of that. I've known all along who the man was, and now that I've had time to think, I've decided to tell."

Florence yelled, "Don't listen to him, he's lying! There's no way he could know."

Charley regarded his sister somberly. "It was his scent, Floy. I smelled it on the playing field when I tackled him, and on you tonight. It's that new clodder, Spurwink, Da. From the Tarcats."

Roger Cairncross leapt up. "The Devils and I will fetch him. Keep our girl here."

Florence threw herself on Charley, knocking him down. She rained blows on his head and shoulders, shrieking, "I hate you, I hate you, I hate you! You awful, hateful prig! You and your stinking Mill can burn!"

Charley made no motion to protect himself. Eventually Florence's rage subsided, and she crawled back to the couch. Charley raised himself off the floor. Tears washed tracks through the blood from his nose.

Spurwink was not much more bloody than Charley when they marched him into the house. One eye was swelling, and he favored one leg. Florence had feared worse. His demeanor was subdued, but still somewhat insouciant.

"Since they tell me we are to be wed soon, I might as well salve my pride and ask if you'll have me. Well, poppet, what shall it be? Pretend you have a choice and answer me now. Will you be my wife?"

Florence was exhausted. She had no reserves left. "I am yours," she said wearily. Spurwink grinned, thinking it was him she had addressed.

But Pastor Purbeck knew it was himself. Or rather, the Valley, the Mill, the Factor.

3.

The bulky man chafed his hands in an abstracted way. For several minutes he merely sat, rubbing those large hands together, squeezing first one then the other. At the end of this period he abruptly ceased all motion, his hands freezing into position. His conscious mind had caught his limbs again at their independent life. An expression of distaste flickered across his

features. He jerked his hands and they flew apart as if they were similar poles of a lodestone. He placed them carefully down on the desk in front of him, palms flat on the felt blotter.

What made his hands betray him? Was it anxiety? Most likely. He had so much on his mind. His mill, the Factor's upcoming visit, Alan's strange behavior of late.… Yet why look for such deep-seated motivations? Perhaps it was only the chill. An unconscious seeking of warmth? His breath did not fog, but felt as if it should. And well it might, were the potbellied stove in the corner, sitting four-pawed on its raised hearth of green-enamelled tiles, to slacken its output any further. Yes, that was probably it. Just a basic animal instinct, nothing complicated about it.…

The man leaned back in his chair and regarded his traitorous hands. They were big-knuckled and hairy. The wiry hair disappeared at his wrists beneath the cuffs of his jacket. The hair was still black on his hands, but the short-cut stubble carpeting the enigmatic lumpy contours of his skull was mostly gray. His eyes were dark, his nose showed signs of having been broken more than once, as did so many ballplayers' noses—although those days were long behind him—and his jaw was blunt and perpetually out-thrust.

Old. He was getting too old for this job. How many more years could he cling to this position? Just as long as he earned a good share of the Factor's largess for his mill. But how long would that be? Long enough to train his protégé and insure his accession, he hoped. Factor grant him that much, he prayed.

The room, the man suddenly realized, felt chillier than just a minute ago. Looking up from the plain scratched woodgrained surface of his desk beyond the blotter—upon which were scattered pasteboard rectangles punched with holes and scribbled with figures, through which were threaded hanks of shining luminous threads of various subtle hues and intensities—he spotted the stovetender asleep, something he had not registered with his earlier glance.

The boy wore a red coat with brass buttons that he put on each morning from his wooden locker among the others just inside the Mill doors. This was the badge of the stoveboys, those who formed, along with the stockboys, the lowest rank of Mill workers. The boy sat on a short three-legged stool beside the sooty coal stove that was rapidly cooling. His chin

hung on his chest, his eyes were closed, and his breath buzzed in and out as if he were acting the part of a diligent bellows.

The man regarded the boy with a mix of good-humored solicitous pity and mild aggravation. He knew how hard it was for these youths—coming into the Mill at age twelve, having known mostly freedom and few responsibilities—to be burdened with one of the most important tasks in the Mill, that of guarding and ministering to and always watching the contained fires that heated the Mill during the winter, and which must never be allowed to escape. Also, it was no easy physical task, constantly hauling scuttles of coal up the long flights of stairs.

On the other hand, these boys were now workers. They were getting paid, drawing a share of credit from the commonly held gold which derived from the Factor's purchase of their cloth each year. These boys had to learn proper work habits early on, if they were ever to be relied upon to intelligently manage the various machines that all contributed toward producing the luxcloth.

And the luxcloth—that unbelievably splendid and gorgeously unique product of this humble uncharted world drifting forgotten and unknown and nameless amid the welter of Factor-visited suns—

The luxcloth was everything.

The luxcloth was his life.

Preparing to rise and shake the boy awake and at the same time administer a severe upbraiding, the man paused. Something about the boy struck him as familiar. Naturally there was a surface identicalness in the incident to many others. He had overseen the initial development of more than half a hundred such boys in his career as Master Luminary, and it was only natural that many of them would more than once be caught napping. But there was something about this lad that tugged more acutely at the strings of his memory. Something about his face.…

Of course.

The boy resembled Charley.

The man's thoughts fled back down a tunnel whose ribbed walls were years.

Charley had entered the Mill in the summer. That meant that he had gone directly to the stockroom, that cavernous brick and timber hall—its high rafters plainly visible, unlike the other dusky chambers of the Mill—where

the luxcloth was stored, a cathedral of radiance so intense that the stockboys must wear smoked-glass goggles as they worked.

The Master Luminary had not particularly noticed the new boy then, having the whole production of his mill to keep in mind. In the winter, a quarter of the boys had been shifted immediately to stovetender duties. (The other three quarters would be rotated out of the stockroom in turn, in order to save their eyesight, as the long cold months went on.) Charley had been one of the first transfers, and he had ended up in the man's office, sitting right where the current boy now sat dozing. The man's hair had been less gray then, and the little stool had had fewer initials carved into it. But aside from that, the situation had been identical.

Something about Charley had attracted the man's close attention. A ceaseless curiosity and darting focus that played about the boy's placidly intelligent features seemed to resonate with something inside the man himself. He made a mental note—along with all the other memoranda regarding the seemingly endless details of his mill—to keep an eye on this boy for future use.

And when Charley's stint as stovetender was supposed to end, along with the old year, the man retained him by fiat in the office, denying three other faceless boys their turns, and perhaps causing some slight incremental damage to their vision as they continued to labor in the stockroom the whole winter.

This small harm he tried to forget, striving to convince himself that the good inherent in his actions outweighed the bad. His life was a patchwork quilt of such ethical trade-offs and judgements. And the quilt frequently scratched his conscience.

Busy years attached themselves like ambulatory Pagan Sea coral to the edifice of the man's life. Always, among his overt duties, he took a covert interest in the progress of young Cairncross. After Charley was promoted from stovetender, the man watched him move from the gillboxes to the spinning frames, from the winders to the converters, always exhibiting a deft proficiency and keen understanding of each step in the intricate process of fabricating luxcloth. The man noted with quiet pleasure the quality of the work that the young man—for by now he was no longer a boy—turned out. After a while, the man felt he knew Charley's secret soul and essence, how it was bound up into the luxcloth's very weave, as was his own.

The only thing the man could never figure out was how such a progeny could spring from the loins of a soured old agitator like the elder Cairncross. That man was a bad egg. And to have also engendered another son such as Alan, so different from both Charley and the old man— The mechanics of destiny were hidden from mortal sight. Perhaps the Factor could explain it.

But one might as well hope for the secret of the Factor's immortality.

The cranky misanthropy of the elder Cairncross, however, was not what the seated man wanted to ponder, and he put it off as ultimately inexplicable. He wanted to consider Charley some more, to recall more of their twenty years of association. Such daydreaming was certainly allowable from time to time, as long as one did not overindulge.

Finally, after nearly a decade of observation, the day came when the Master Luminary approached Charley on an errand he, the Master, had never before performed. Charley was a foreman by this time, supervising a score of workers, among whom was his own father, who had never gone further than machinetender, a post whose duties were changing gears and oiling bearings.

Out on the twilit floor, where the only illumination came from the dancing threads running through the machines like liquid moonlight and from the refulgent yarn on cones and bobbins piled high in hand trucks, and where the noise of the leather belts and the pulleys and the gears—all powered off the Swolebourne—was enough to shatter concentration, the Master found Charley supervising the changing of the worn rollers on an idled machine.

"Cairncross," the man said. "Leave this now and come with me."

"Yes, Master Otterness," Charley replied.

They walked across the width of the mill and up a flight of stairs to the third and topmost floor, all the while silent. In the anteroom to Otterness's own office, the Master Luminary indicated with a wave a tall spidery clerk's workbench and accompanying high rail-backed chair.

"You will sit here," said Otterness. "Begin studying the sample cards that chart the standard luminances. Start with the Whale- ford set. They're the classic gauges from which all others derive. I doubt if you will get much beyond those today."

"Yes, sir."

Otterness turned to enter his own office, heard Charley cough, and swivelled back.

Charley's face wore a look of hurt disappointment. "Sir, may I ask why I've been relieved of my former duties? I hope I have not disappointed you with inferior production."

"To the contrary. Your work has been exemplary. The best I've ever seen. That is why I am now nominating you as Apprentice Luminary for this mill. I believe you have the talent for such a post, and understand the grave responsibilities involved. On the Tightness of our luminance choices and the resulting attractiveness of the cloth, the whole material well-being of the Blue Devil village rests. I trust you will repay my faith in you, and let neither me nor the mill nor the village down."

Charley bowed his head for a moment. When he lifted it, light from the oil lamp glinted in his tears. "I will, sir. I will. I mean, I won't. Let you down, that is."

Otterness suppressed a smile. "Very well."

Now he came back to himself in his office. The stoveboy still slept. Otterness considered the scullion's dreaming features. He knew he would never have occasion to choose another apprentice. He would die in his job, or be dismissed by a committee of his peers from the other mills if his performance became senilely awful, whereupon in both instances Charley would become Master, with the consequent right to select his own apprentice. But the fact that Otterness was not always on the outlook for talent anymore did not mean that he could risk alienating the skilled. Who was to say what role this snoozing boy would possibly play in the future? The mill—and the Mill—needed all the competent hands it could get. His unnecessarily brusque reprimand here could have unforeseen consequences years down the line. No, better to handle the lapse—after all, it was only the boy's first—in a subtler manner.

Otterness deliberately pushed back his chair with a loud scraping noise, his face averted from the stoveboy. He had the satisfaction of hearing the regular breathing suddenly stop in a panicked reaction, then the noise of the boy's booted feet as he stood up and the clunk of the stove door opening and the chunky rattle as he began scooping coal into the stove.

Getting to his own feet, Otterness turned to the boy—who was drowsily rubbing his eyes with one hand while dishing out coal with the other—and

said (pausing a moment while he recalled the boy's name), "Pickering, have that stove good and hot by the time I get back, if you please."

Now furiously tossing coal with a two-handed motion, little Pickering said, "Yes, sir! Of course, sir! Before you return, sir!"

Otterness stepped outside his office. The anteroom was empty. He knew Charley was out somewhere on the mill floor, among the turbulent, clattering, endlessly breaking-down machines, watching and directing the myriad workers who strove to reify the newest type of shining cloth which he and Charley envisioned and sometimes, it seemed, actually dreamed into possibility, after much contemplation and discussion of possible blendings. Having something vital he must discuss with Charley—the original object of the intense pondering that had allowed him to let Pickering fall into a doze and his own hands to escape—Otterness set out to find his assistant.

Leaving the relatively quiet anteroom—whose thick panelled walls, bearing sconced oil lamps, served to mute the continuous roar of the machinery—was like plunging into a surf of shadow and sound and odor. Pausing while his eyes adjusted to the silvery gloom, Otterness drank in the glorious chaos from which his beloved luxcloth emerged.

The Mill had no lighting except in its offices. All its other operations were conducted in the ethereal glow of its product. The luxfibers, in their various unfinished forms such as raw combed tops or spun threads, had to be protected from sunlight or artificial radiance, and so all activities in the Mill took place in a diffuse illumination that amounted to the light one might encounter when both moons were full. This illumination had to suffice. There was no alternative without ruining the product. The reason lay in the very nature of the lux.

Lux was a common plant, native and unique to this world, easy to cultivate and harvest. In the daytime it was an inconspicuous crop: tall waving fronds of a silvery green with tough fibers visible just inside its translucent stalks. But at night—at night it could be seen to glow. With the sun's competition gone, the lux visibly re- radiated stored sunlight. At least this was the most commonly accepted theory. No one—save perhaps the Factor, and he was unapproachable on such matters—could quite agree on the reason for the lux's remarkable properties. A rival to the sunlight theory was that the lux absorbed certain glowing minerals from the soil, which, becoming part and parcel of its very being, allowed it to continue shining

even after being chopped down and processed in a dozen different ways, shattered and pulled and twisted and recombined.

Whatever the true explanation, one fact was certain: continued exposure to any light above a certain threshold after the lux was harvested would drastically affect its desirable qualities in an unpredictable fashion. Thus the lux led a most secretive afterdeath existence, like some noble god fated to an underworld imprisonment. Hurriedly reaped and crammed into cunningly crafted barrels in the fields under starlight, it was loaded onto wagons which were then covered by canvas tarpaulins as further insurance. These wagons were kept indoors by day and traveled only at night. Still a faint luminance came from them, revealing that all the best precautions could not insure a light-tight seal.

Upon arrival at the Mill, the lux plunged into the massive building's lightless depths, never to emerge until it had undergone a final wet chemical finishing that fixed the radiance once and for all. The luxcloth, then, could be exposed to daylight without ruining its miraculous qualities.

The fact that there were different kinds of lux was the simple pivot that made Otterness and his peers the most important men in the Mill, and which allowed competition between mills to exist. Had there been only one kind of lux, all would have been simple. Only a single variety of cloth could have been produced, and the Factor would have bought equally from all sixteen mills. But every region where lux was produced experienced different conditions: soil, sunlight, clouds, precipitation, all contributing toward the individual qualities of a region's lux. Some shone with an opal whiteness. Another kind might exhibit a diamond purity. A third was nearly blue, a fourth celery green, a fifth amethyst, another the faintest of yellows.

Within hundreds of miles of the Mill, there were as many different types of lux produced. From all quarters they funneled into the unduplicated manufactory that was the Mill. The dishwater-colored harvest from Teaford; the ale-colored harvest from Claypool; the silver harvest from Goldenfish; the lilac harvest from Albion Cay; the ginger harvest from Clinkscales; the pewter harvest from Yellow Hedges; the pinkish harvest from Fireflats; the champagne harvest from Shining Rock—each with its gradations of luminance also. The number of blends were astronomical.

There were well over a hundred known luminances. Whale- ford, Emberstone, Sleet, Silent Sea Wine … The catalogue went on and on. A

Master Luminary had to be able to instantly recognize each kind without error, so as to spot inadvertent mixes and stop them before they got too far into production. Moreover, the Master Luminary had to know all the standard blendings, and also those poor choices which resulted in muddy or eye-shattering fabric. On top of all this, the Master Luminary had to be a creative experimenter, developing his hunches about what new blends would turn out to be marketable, thus securing one's mill an inordinate share of the Factor's patronage. (And even after four centuries of trial and error, all the blends were not known.)

Additionally, the Masters engaged in bidding wars for each region's crops. They had to be skillful traders as well as perceptive visionaries.

In short, the fortunes of a mill and its village, the day-to-day standard of living of its families, rose and fell with the Master Luminary's skillful or clumsy decisions.

Otterness was a fine and expert Master. He knew Charley had the potential to be even better. It felt good to think of the mill being left after his death to such a successor.

But first, Otterness reminded himself, we must get past this latest obstacle.

Moving off in search of Charley, Otterness savored the noisy clatter of the belt-driven machines that marched in ranks down the unbroken length of this mill section, and inhaled the ripe smell of the vegetable oil used to lubricate them. He could sense in his bloodstream the harnessed and dedicated power of the Swolebourne far down beneath the Mill, where its constricted currents turned the great wheels that transmitted their power via an intricate system of gears and shafts throughout the building.

Otterness took the time then to issue a brief prayer for heavy snows, so that during spring and summer the Swolebourne would rush even more mightily and much work could be accomplished in a last burst before the Factor arrived in the autumn.

Down in weaving Otterness found Charley watching the warpers thread a loom with a warp of Sleet Nine, which had a tendency to break easily. Here was virtual silence. The looms were the only unpowered machines in the Mill, the process being too delicate and complicated to automate, and much skill being required in the casting of the shuttle and the beating of the woof. No one had ever been able to devise mechanical substitutes for the human

weaver’s hand and eye, and Otterness was confident no one ever would. At times, he regarded the looms as a bottleneck in the production process, but always quickly reminded himself that the old ways that had persisted for centuries were undoubtedly the best. If the looms ever could be automated, the quality of the work would probably plunge, and where would the mill and its workers, not to mention Otterness’s reputation, be then?

“Charley,” called Otterness, above the staccato clicking of the myriad flying shuttles, “I need to see you.”

Charley gave a final pointer to the warpers and came up to Otterness. “Yes, sir. What’s on your mind?”

“I prefer not to discuss it here, son. Let’s walk out on the floor.”

Charley nodded assent, and they left the weaveroom. Boys trundled noisy wooden-wheeled hand trucks past them, moving yarn from one part of the mill to another. Otterness thought in passing about all the myriad skills needed to keep the Mill going: carpenters, masons, engineers, machinists, beltwrights, oilers, stoveboys … Sometimes it amazed him that such a complicated extravagant delicate assemblage of people and machines could function for even a single day.

“Charley,” announced Otterness after they had walked a few yards, “I’ve decided. We’re going to devote a full fourth of our production after the Factor leaves this fall to the new Idlenorth and Palefire blend.”

Charley stopped in midstep and turned to face Otterness. “But sir—the Idlenorth is a new breed. We’re not even assured yet of steady supply. What if the growers have a bad year? And the Palefire—my God, that’s one of the trickiest yarns to spin. I know the sample of the blend we ran off was breathtaking. But a quarter of our output— Sir, I just don’t—”

Otterness held up a palm toward Charley to stop the torrent of speech. “I have considered all these issues and others you might not even stumble upon for months. I do not say this to boast, but merely to reassure you that I do not plunge into this without adequate forethought. But it is our only recourse. I do not blame you for not immediately coming to the same conclusion. You are missing part of the equation, one vital fact that forces our hand.”

Otterness resumed walking down the aisle dusted with lint that ran between the twisting machines. Workers looked up with momentary interest, then quickly turned back to their demanding tasks. For a moment,

shining motes of lux hovered around Otterness's head in a chance-formed halo and Charley regarded him with more than a little awe evident on his face. Quickly catching up to the Master Luminary, Charley waited for him to explain.

Instead, Otterness asked a question. "How long have you been working in the Mill, Charley?"

"Why, nearly twenty years, sir."

Otterness nodded sagely. "You confirm my own memories, which I sometimes doubt. In that case, then, you were probably too young to really notice the lean years we passed through right about then, when the Tarcats started production."

The naming of the sixteenth mill seemed to trigger some sudden flood of remembrance in Charley, for his face grew distant. "I remember—I remember that period well. And now that you mention it, I do recall some talk about how the new mill would affect us all. But I don't really remember tough times, no. Always enough food on the table, new clothes when needed.…"

"I take that as a compliment to the way I handled the challenge," said Otterness. "The Tarcats were diligent and inventive. Their workers had a hungry desire to establish themselves, which we complacent older mills sometimes lose. Three years after the Tarcats started up, they earned ten percent of the Factor's gold. All other mills earned correspondingly less—some much less, some not so much. And when the dust settled, some of those mills—you can probably name them if you think about it—never recovered their former status. Of course, the Factor compensated somewhat, by buying overall a slightly greater quantity of cloth than before, but not enough to make up for the new mill's total production. It was as if—I don't know. As if he were encouraging competition for competition's sake. Perhaps his buyers grow jaded, and this is the Factor's method of shaking us up and producing newer, more exotic goods."

Charley remained silent, and it seemed he was trying to digest all this uncommon and startling information—or rather, this new perspective on old events. Otterness lowered his voice, and Charley had to strain to hear his next words.

"What I am about to tell you must not be bruited about. The common folk will discover it soon enough anyway. This fall, the Factor is going to bid us

start construction on another new mill. He warned us Luminaries last year."

Charley drew in his breath sharply. Otterness grabbed his arm. "I'm not going to be caught flatfooted this time, anymore than the last. I know the new mill won't come online for many years. Still, it's none too early to experiment with new blends. If we can grab the Factor's attention now, well be more likely to hold it during the rough years. Do you see, Charley? Do you see what we must do?"

Charley regarded the blunt-faced man with a direct and serious gaze that locked their visages—young and old—into a composite like those illusory drawings of vases that suddenly transform beneath one's attention into two profiles. "I do, Master Otterness. Roland, I do."

A wash of affection swept through Otterness at Charley's use of his first name. How different it sounded out of his mouth than off Alan's lips of late.…

"Now, secrecy is paramount regarding this decision, Charley. You and I are the only ones who know of this. Were the other mills to discover our plans, we would lose all advantage. I do not want this to turn into another debacle like the Sandcrab mess. How the other Luminaries ever discovered our schemes for that mix, I still cannot say."

"Nor no more I," interjected Charley hurriedly.

"I'm not blaming you, son, for the leak. Too many wagging tongues knew about that game strategy. The tattler could have been any of a dozen, in whose numbers you're definitely not included. But I'm just speaking aloud my own fears."

Charley nodded in understanding.

Otterness clapped a hand on Charley's shoulder then, saying, "But enough of such dire talk, son. We'll be discussing this issue oft enough in the years to come. Let's speak of more pleasant things. How are your wife and son lately?"

Libby Straw, from the Swift Sparrow village, a member of one of the Valley's oldest families, had become Charley's bride five years ago, and had come to live in the Blue Devil village.

"Fine, sir," replied Charley, though he still seemed ruminative. "Both healthy and fit, the one still beautiful and the other still a red-faced squaller."

"And your mother and sister?"

“Also hale. Floy I saw just last week, when she came over from the Tarcats for the quilting bee.”

“She is happy there, then?”

“Yes, although even after all these years she still misses Blue Devil ways at times.”

“It was a shame, the way she was plunged headlong into that match. Your father was never the same after it. But I’m glad to hear she’s matured into it.”

“Oh, she has. She even deigns to speak to me now.”

The men shared a chuckle then at the folly of women. They walked on unspeaking … After a time, Otterness broke the silence, rather timorously for one usually so confident.

“And your brother, Alan—does he ever speak confidentially to you about his feelings toward me?”

Charley looked gloomy. “Alan keeps his own counsel, I’m afraid. Mother continues to coddle him, and his lack of a job has not improved his character. No, sir, I cannot report anything on Alan’s inner thoughts.”

Otterness tried to put some unfelt joviality into his voice. “So be it. I’ll have to muddle along on my own with the young rascal.”

The men reached the rear lamplit staircase and began to climb. Charley spoke.

“Sir, might there not be another way to improve production, in order to meet the new competition? I am thinking of certain modifications in the machinery, and perhaps even in our method of power. I have heard Tarrytown rumors about steam—”

Otterness recoiled visibly. To hear such talk from his protégé was perhaps the most disturbing thing that could have happened at this crucial juncture in the Mill’s existence. He wondered suddenly if young Cairncross could have inherited any of his father’s wild-eyed cynicism. Best to probe gently around the roots of this heresy and then yank it up for good.

“What you are advocating, Charley,” Otterness said slowly, “is the first step on a very slippery slope. If we begin to tamper with our time-honored methods of production—which the Factor has endorsed implicitly by his continued visits—then we risk all. Consider the upheaval in Mill hierarchies and procedures which new devices would bring, not to mention the radical alterations in village life. Do you wish to precipitate such things?”

Charley said nothing for a minute, then said—with what Otterness took for sincere conviction—“No, sir. No, I do not. Please forget I ever proposed such a foolish step.”

“It’s not your father who’s filling your head with such ideas, is it? I know he’s been especially bitter since the probation incident.”

Charley leapt to his father’s defense. “No, sir, he’s not been preaching those things anymore. And as for the probation—he admits that losing two month’s work was only fair for what he did. I don’t know what came over him, sir, actually to light his pipe in the Mill. God, I like my smokeweed as much as the next man, but to think of what could happen in this oil-soaked warren if a single spark should land in the wrong place— He’s promised me personally never to do such a thing again, sir. He was only tired and unthinking, is what it was.”

Otterness softened his tone. “I understand, Charley. We all make mistakes. I have nothing personal against your father, you understand. It’s only that occasionally … Well, you know what I mean.”

“It’s all right, sir. No offense taken. You’ve got the welfare of the whole Mill at heart, I know.”

Otterness felt relieved. “That’s just it, Charley. We’re all only partially cognizant of the real nature of things, you know. And I feel that my perception of reality is just a little more valid and complete than your father’s. It’s the big view, Charley, that you and I share. That is why the workers trust us to guide the affairs of the mill. And that’s also why we can’t seek after new ways, Charley. Because we don’t know enough. Don’t you think that the Factor—with his vastly superior knowledge—couldn’t lift us up out of our traditions if he chose? But since he doesn’t so choose, then we must have the best life we’re fit for. It all comes down to trust in the end. Either we trust the Factor’s decisions, and the workers trust ours, or everything collapses.”

“I see,” said Charley.

Otterness thought of a last image to persuade Charley, one that he frequently resorted to when doubtful himself. “We’re all just bricks, Charley. Just bricks in the Mill. And we can have no greater idea of the whole grand plan than a brick has of the immensity it forms a part of.”

Charley seemed struck by some personal resonance in Otterness’s trope. “Just bricks,” he muttered. “Just bricks.”

When they reached the office again, Pickering had it cozily hot. Dismissing the stoveboy to insure absolute secrecy, the Master Luminary and his Apprentice set about outlining the transition to the new blend. The hours passed in intense absorption for the two men. The final bell tolled, sending all the regular workers home, and still the pair toiled on. At last, closer to midnight than to sunset, they broke up their labor for the evening.

Outside the Mill they walked together across the crunchy snowfield, silent in their individual thoughts. Among the quiet snow-shrouded houses they parted, Charley to join his family, Otterness to greet an empty home.

Looking up for the first time only when he stood on the stoop of his house, Otterness was startled to see a light on inside his rooms. With his heart pounding, he opened the unlocked door and stepped inside.

Alan Cairncross was a slim young man with blond hair and thin lips. At age twenty-five, he still had hardly any cause to shave daily. Unadept at ballgames, he excelled at the annual spring morris dances. Even walking through the village, he carried himself with unusual grace. Slouched now in Otterness's favorite chair, he retained this allure.

Otterness's mouth was dry. Memories rose to plague him. The first time he had seen Alan, at a dinner at Charley's house, some six years ago. Summer nights spent lying together outdoors on the meadowed Valley slopes. Winter nights like this one by a roaring fire. Old. He was getting too old. Old men had too many memories.

"Alan, it's so good to see you again. Will you have a drink? I could easily mull some ale.…"

Alan straightened up. "No, thank you, Roland. I'm not here to stay the night. I just wanted to talk a bit. How is everything with you? How's work?"

Seating himself across from Alan, Otterness found himself beginning to babble like an adolescent. Alan listened attentively. Then, for some reason, he reached out to grab Otterness's hand. The Master responded by squeezing the other's upper thigh.

"Roland, stop, I cannot continue with this deception."

Otterness's heart crumbled inside him, like a brick powdered by a sledgehammer. In a blinding instant he knew what Alan was about to say. But he had to hear it from the young man himself. "What—what do you mean?"

“For the last two years I’ve been a spy, a serpent in your bosom. The Scorpions have paid me handsomely to learn of your plans in advance. Actually, it was not them alone. Others too. That’s why I’ve been so cool to you lately. I’ve hated myself every moment we’ve been together. I can’t stand it any longer. I’ve come to say goodbye.”

Otterness surprised his hands together again, rubbing, squeezing. Alan’s neck was so thin.…

He forced them apart. Maybe if he had blurted out the latest scheme. But he had not. Thank the Factor for small favors, however ironic.

“Why?” he managed to ask.

Alan shrugged. “I could say it was the money. That was what I thought at first myself. But I realize now that it was because you loved the Mill more than you loved me.”

Otterness tried to deny the charge. But he could not.

“And you could never reconcile yourself to that status, if it had to be?”

“How can my answer matter, after what I’ve done?”

“Just tell me.”

“I—I don’t know. I could try to understand.”

Otterness put both hands on Alan’s thighs. How much better they felt there, than around his throat.

“Then just try. That’s all I ask.”

Alan’s eyes widened in astonishment. “That’s all?”

Otterness smiled. “And why not? That’s all life asks.”

4.

Seen from three miles high, the autumnal Valley was an abstract composition illustrating the beauty of pure geometry and color. By far the greater part of the Valley was a mass of brilliant fiery foliage: from both ridgetops, down almost to the outhouses that were the most distal structures from the Mill, spread a carpet of orange and red and yellow treecrowns threaded with green, like a bed of inextinguishable coals salted with minerals.

Trees bracketed the Mill and the dwellings of the workers. The Mill’s slate roof stretched straight down the Valley’s length, a fat gray line that swallowed a skinnier silver-blue and rippling turbulent one at the north and disgorged it at the south. The clustered houses—each village separated from

the others on its side by sere brown fields—punctuated the exclamation mark that was the Mill like bisected umlauts somehow gone astray from their vowels, the punctual Mill and its outliers as a whole signifying the exclamatory pronunciation of some obscure but vital word.

Beyond the Valley other settlements could be dimly apprehended. Of course, under further magnification they could be resolved to any required depth.

The Factor, regarding the aerial view on the screens of his titanic spherical ship now hovering directly above the Mill, thought—insofar as he was capable of appreciation—that it was a rather esthetically pleasing vista.

He was glad that he had gotten a chance to come here at last. As with all places in this miraculous universe, it was a sight worth seeing in and of itself. But it took on special meaning when one considered the remarkable product that was produced here and only here, in this archaic and time-lost Valley. From what he had heard, he had quite a reception in store when he set foot below to redeem the goods that had been stockpiled all year against his coming. He couldn’t know for sure, of course, until he jacked in, never having been here before.

It was time now, he supposed, for that particular precontact necessity. Yet for a moment the Factor hesitated. He was unwontedly sentimental today, outside all his parameters. He supposed it stemmed from the fact that he was visiting this world for the first time in his long and limitless life span. His yearly round of planetary visits normally took him only to worlds he had been to at least once before. His coming here was a newness to be savored, arising from the rare disappearance elsewhere of the Factorial ship previously assigned here. The next time he visited this world, it would be as one returning to the familiar. There would be no exciting thrill of the heretofore unseen to add a touch of spice to his unvarying and solitary life. And although the Factor had been designed to tolerate a degree of boredom and regularity which would have driven a human insane, he still found newness a thing not unwelcome in small doses.

So for a few minutes the Factor merely reclined in his chair and studied the view offered on his remote panels. When he had drunk his fill of these visual stimuli, he reached with both hands up and behind his padded headrest, grasping a node-studded wire cage which he swung up on its arm until it rested securely atop his skull.

Then he jacked in.

When he arose a second later, he knew the whole history of this world. Not dating from its initial settlement by humans, of course. Those records were long ago vanished, destroyed or mislaid when the Concordance disintegrated in a galaxywide psychic calamity, or evolutionary leap. No, the history that the Factor had so effortlessly internalized began after the Inwardness, when the Factors had been created, almost as an afterthought, to partially resume a role that most of mankind had abandoned. Interstellar travel no longer appealed to those human societies capable of it. Integrating themselves into the Bohmian implicate order that underlay external reality, they had moved on to other, less visible concerns. Still, those who had turned Inward had not wholly severed themselves from their primitive cousins elsewhere, the mental Neanderthals who had failed to make the transition, and continued to maintain an obscure and manipulative concern with information and products from other worlds.

Not that those who had turned Inward could really use material goods as they once used to.

The Factors now obediently and disinterestedly served to link, in an almost gratuitous fashion, the scattered and devolved human communities around the galaxy that had not turned Inward.

The Factors had discovered—or rediscovered—this world over four centuries ago. They had fastened on one product as being of interest to their human motivators. They had encouraged the production of the luxcloth in the manner that seemed best to their semiautonomous intellects, stimulating competition and diversity every generation or so by ordering a new mill complex to be constructed. Elaborate rituals had evolved around the visit of a Factor—which ceremonies were not discouraged, contributing as they did toward respect and compliance.

And now the cycle had come round again. It was time for this Factor to initiate the familiar exchange which he had never actually participated in before. And also time to order the new mill built. That was imperative. The old Factor’s resolve to order new construction was plain in the inherited memories the new Factor had received. He had no worries that the populace would balk at the commands, no doubts that this might not be the best course for them and their world.

Such concerns were simply not an issue that mattered to the Factor or those who directed him, and hence were not included in his complex programming.

The Factor moved off his couch. He was tall and supple- jointed, clad in a slick almost rubbery black suit that merged imperceptibly into boots. His features were nondescript almost to the point of invisibility; his head was hairless; his limbs, although not heavily muscled, seemed powerful. His irises were silver.

Beside a metallic cabinet tall as himself, the Factor stopped. He picked out a sequence on a keypad blazoned with icons. In a slot at waist level materialized a bar of worthless atomically pure gold. The Factor crooked his right arm, picked up the ingot with his other hand, and placed it on his horizontal forearm up near his elbow. Another brick appeared; it went next to the first. This continued until the Factor held, apparently effortlessly, about a score of stacked ingots that must have weighed well over two hundred pounds.

Without haste the Factor exited the main cabin of his ship. Passage through corridors and portals brought him to a huge bay filled with auxiliary craft. There the Factor entered a landing pod. He piled the gold neatly on a floating pallet waiting inside the spherical pod. He sat in the command chair, activated the pod’s screens and drive. Several panels showed various views of the Valley, while one disclosed the big ship itself, as if seen from a small device already on the ground. In this last screen the Factor witnessed his pod’s departure. Like a cell budding, the daughter craft separated from the floating sphere and rapidly dropped, down toward its tradition-bound meeting.

Within less than a minute, under swift acceleration and deceleration whose forces the Factor did not appear to feel, the pod came to a rest on the earth. The Factor got to his feet. He caused the outer door to open.

The natives awaited him. It was impressive in a primitive way, as a school of bright fish might be.

The pod had arrived roughly halfway along the length of the Mill, settling in the middle of a vast playing field in a compacted bowl-shaped hollow worn by the accumulated landings of four hundred years. Here it would stay during the seven Days of Festival—a celebration that began soberly but soon escalated to what amounted to a bacchanalia utterly unlike anything

indulged in during the rest of the year. A curious custom, thought the Factor, and one he would welcome the chance to observe.

Stepping to the port, the Factor made his ritual initial appearance. The field had been decorated with bright pennons and streamers, all strung from a multitude of wooden poles. Numerous booths had been erected by outsiders to the Valley, who arrived each year to share in the new prosperity. Here were sold such items as food and drink and clothing, jewelry and geegaws, and other novel diversions distinct from the familiar goods in the Company Store. This was the only time hoarded coins circulated in the Valley, as the elaborate credit and barter system utilized by the Valley dwellers could not extend to outsiders, who demanded payment in solid currency.

Beyond the booths were sixteen billowing tents, striped with the colors of the individual mills, their flaps closed against competitors and the curious. Inside these awaited samples of the year's luxcloth, trucked from the various storerooms, ready for the Factor's inspection.

A ramp extruded itself from the Factor's feet to the ground. At the foot of the ramp waited sixteen men, mostly old, wearing their freshly cleaned and pressed black suits and white shirts and heavy shoes, all so drab compared to the shining stuff they produced. Beyond them clotted a tremendous crowd, all respectfully hushed.

The Factor raised a gloved hand. The hush intensified in an indescribable fashion, as if silence could be doubled and redoubled like noise, until it reached a magnitude almost painful.

"I am here to judge and to winnow," said the Factor, shattering the loud silence with the words instilled in him, "to separate dross and chaff from the pure and valuable. Whatever satisfies me I will buy, and the fame of your work will travel with me among the stars."

"We are ready," the Master Luminaries chorused simply.

A nearly visible wave of relaxation coursed through the crowd of workers, as the greeting was completed according to form. Murmurs of speculation and excitement sounded like a minor duplication of the Mill's normal purring, which was absent during the Festival.

The Factor descended the ramp, the Master Luminaries parting to allow him into their middle. As a group, the men and the Factor moved off.

Now the Factor experienced the familiar yet always disorienting doubling of perceptions and memories that never failed to accompany jacking in. He possessed all the memories of all his brother Factors who had ever visited this world, yet not totally integrated into his private consciousness. Thus all he saw appeared at first mysterious and strange, then a second later, totally explicable and mundane.

Striving to completely internalize his artificially acquired past, the Factor still found time to appreciate the spectacle before him. He had landed during late afternoon. Invisible tethers hauled down the big white sun, like some impossible dirigible, to below the western ridge. How good its autumnal heat felt, after the time spent within the ship, how clear and penetrating the blue-white light. And the smells of harvest time, the slight dampness and chill in the moving air.… They tingled on his chemoreceptors.

Did these backward, unsophisticated folk realize the wonder of their world, of any world? Did they know how lucky they were just to inhabit such a bountiful globe, out of all the charred and dead and frozen ones the Factor had seen? For a brief moment the Factor almost envied them their uncomplicated primitive existence. They were so unlike the aloofly superior humans who had ventured Inward. The Factor felt a paternal care for these primitives envelop him. He was glad to be able to provide such a focus for their simple lives.

It did not matter to the Factor then that he had been engineered to feel just such an emotion. After all, considered rationally, every creature, whether organic or not, was engineered to feel certain things.

And this charming divertissement, the Days of Festival! What a lot of work and preparation had gone into this Mill Valley Mardi Gras! As a proportion of the Gross Planetary Product, expenditures for this affair were quite significant. The Factor directed his gaze all about, careful to record everything, since he knew that when he returned to his human motivators his memories would be minutely and exquisitely probed and analyzed and correlated by those cryptic beings, for whatever they could extract and utilize in their enigmatic schemes.

One of the Master Luminaries, the Factor suddenly realized, was addressing him. The Factor turned to face the man, as the group continued their traditional promenade among the booths, for the purpose of allowing

everyone to circumspectly gape at the Factor and ascertain his awesome unchanging immortal reality for themselves.

“Factor,” said the man, who had short grizzled hair and a thick jaw, “we realize it is late in the day, but perhaps we can still make a tour of the mill of your choice, so that you can see that we continue to abide by the old ways of production.”

The Factor, after a fractional hesitation while he matched facial image to memory, replied, “Indeed, I think we can fit the tour in, Master Otterness. As I recall, I visited the mill of the Red Stalkers last year. This year.…”

The Factor considered his choice. It would be well, he thought, to pay an honor to this very man, who had a record of being one of the Factor’s staunchest partisans. “This year, let it be your mill, the Blue Devils.”

Watching the man swell with pride, the Factor congratulated himself on the political wisdom of his choice. It was good to sow envy and contention, for it raised the levels of creativity.

Hearing the Factor’s decree, the Luminaries now directed their course toward the distant Mill. They soon reached the edges of the crowd. Ready to strike off down the path to the Mill, they were halted by Otterness’s sudden darting escape back into the crowd, from which he dragged forth a young man to join them.

“Factor,” said Otterness, “you remember my assistant, I hope.”

“Certainly. Charley, how are you?”

The young man tugged at a short-billed cap he wore and inclined his head respectfully. “Very well, Factor. Very well. I—we’re all glad of your return.”

Nodding beneficently, with an air of much wisdom, the Factor said, “We are all part of a master plan, Apprentice Cairncross, and I merely fulfill my part.”

The Luminaries expressed their appreciation of this sentiment with various wordless sounds.

After their mutual cooing was over, Otterness spoke the next words of the ritual. Chosen as host by the Factor, he could request the presence of one other member of his mill on the tour of inspection.

“Factor, I wish to nominate as the extra member of our party my protégé, Charley Cairncross. After all, someday he will stand in my place, and might as well become accustomed to his future duties.”

The other Luminaries harrumphed and coughed, jealous of the extra attention focused on the Blue Devil mill. But such unexpected shifts and seeming favoritism were necessary to keep this little hive of humanity humming. (The Factor even recalled, in his secondhand way, how one of the mills—not by far the strongest today—had been given reason to once name itself Factor's Favorites.)

"Of course, Master Otterness. I fully approve your choice."

Not daring to contravene or protest, the other Luminaries settled down to a ruffled acquiescence, and the group, enlarged by one, left behind the noisy, exuberant crowd and entered the shadow of the Mill.

The tour of the strangely silent mill took several hours. In the elfinlit twilight the little party moved from section to section, among the resting hulking machines: carding, gilling, doubling, twisting, roving, spinning.… They ended up in the weaveroom, inspecting the unfinished lengths of lambent cloth. The Luminaries were all eyes, eager to see any secret blends Otterness might have carelessly left in the open. But the resident Luminary wore such a look of self-satisfaction that they knew any such things would have been hidden well in advance, in anticipation of just such a visit. After all, had they not taken just such precautions themselves?

At last the tour of inspection was over. The Factor signified his approval of all he had seen, and the group rejoined the crowd outside. Now it was early evening. Odors of cooking drifted among the huge bonfires that had been lit. The material for these pyres, the Factor knew, was partially composed of discarded household items contributed by each family, in a ceremony of renewal that intrigued him. How easy if burning the old were all that was required to create the new.…

The Factor was now brought to a long table draped with a piece of luxcloth that added its glow to the light from lamps and fires. He was seated at its middle, with eight Luminaries on either side. They all fell to eating. The Factor pretended to enjoy his food. Meanwhile he watched the crowd. There were no tables for the common workers, only scattered benches, and they took advantage of the constant movement of the crowd to circulate past the Factor's table, watching him eat as if it were the most marvelous thing in the world.

A familiar figure caught the Factor's eye some distance away, and he magnified his vision. It was Charley Cairncross, with a group of people that

the Factor surmised must be his relatives: a young wife with a toddler, an elderly couple that had to be his parents, a thin graceful youth and another young woman, whose resemblance to Charley made them his two siblings. Everyone in the little cluster seemed tense, the focus being the father. Charley, standing, bent over the seated patriarch in a cajoling fashion. The older man wore a sour face and stubbornly stared into the middle distance, apparently refusing to listen to his son. The Factor boosted his hearing and ran through several filter sequences, finally managing to extract a bit of their conversation from the general hubbub.

"Da, try to be more cheerful. Alan, Floy, tell him he's acting like a senseless old bull. There's nothing to account for such an attitude. It's Festival, after all, and we're here to celebrate."

"What have we got to celebrate?" the father demanded. "What but another year of servitude?"

"Da, don't …," said the brother, Alan.

"Don't talk to me, you little catamite. You're as bad as your sister."

The Factor's attention was distracted from this interesting display by the rising of the Master Luminary at his right, a skinny middle-aged man he identified as the overseer of the Landfish. The Master Luminary coughed several times until he had the attention of those closest to him. They fell quiet, and from them the silence spread among the workers, who began to draw in closely to the table. Soon the entire gathered populace, save for those at the very farthest extremes, was hushed and expectant beneath the watching stars.

The Master Luminary spoke loudly. "The Factor will now address us." Then he sat down.

On cue, the Factor arose. He made the requisite internal adjustments, and when he began to speak his voice boomed out without distortion, carrying almost over the entire crowd. Of duty and reward and the happy unchanging durable nature of their lives the Factor spoke at length, varying his speech only slightly from previous years. The crowd seemed to appreciate it, in a sleepy fashion. But the Factor's closing words caused them to grow alert.

"And now I call upon you—you lucky ones, who labor for worthy ends in the Mill, and share in the bounty of the system—to extend your generosity. I call upon you to arrange construction of a new addition to the glory of the Mill, so that more outsiders may share your humble, shining way of life,

and cause the wonder of the luxcloth to spread even farther throughout the stars."

The Factor ceased speaking. There was silence for a strained moment from the assembled listeners. Then someone vented a loud if dutiful huzzah, and soon the night air was split with calls and cries and whistles and yells. The bonfires blazed higher, and the crowd began to move again.

Sitting, the Factor received the congratulations of the Master Luminaries, all of whom pledged their best to hasten the construction of the new mill.

Curiosity subroutines moved the Factor to look for the Cairncross family once more, when the hullabaloo had died down a bit. But the affecting tableau they had formed was nowhere to be seen, broken up and dispersed like flotsam in a stream.

The night wore on. The Factor catalogued many more experiences in his unwearying way. Everything and anything might be of interest to his masters.

The first man to spot the fire break through the roof of the Mill ended the celebration. His sickened curdled shouts of "Fire! Fire in the Mill!" brought the Master Luminaries and the Factor to their feet.

All eyes now turned to the Mill, there to confirm the alarm.

From the roof of the immense structure licked as yet tiny tongues of flame, evilly alive against the dead hide of the stolid creature that was the nonsentient but ensouled Mill. Even as the dumbstruck people watched, the flames seemed to grow in strength and power.

Otterness broke the trance. "Get men down into the cellars!" he shouted, referring, the Factor knew, to where the hidden river could be reached. "We must form the bucket brigades!"

Otterness moved then as if to lead the rush to his threatened beloved mill, but the Factor restrained him. "There is no need to endanger your people. My ship is quite capable of ending this blaze. I will issue the commands from my pod."

Shouts of "Praise the Factor!" quickly mounted. Otterness looked uneasy, however, but restrained himself. The Factor traversed the short distance to his pod and gave orders for the mother ship to drop and begin spraying.

He returned to the table of Luminaries. All the Masters looked nervous. The Factor noticed Otterness was missing. He asked where the man had gone.

“To the Mill,” replied the Landfish Master. “He and his Apprentice insisted on going in. We tried to stop them, Factor, but they would not listen. Honestly, they wouldn’t.”

The Factor considered. The substance his craft would soon begin spraying was a chemical flame retardant which might asphyxiate the men. He could not be responsible for their deaths. That was an integral part of his programming. His policy of benign neglect of their whole society was not consistent with this individual and particular loss of life.

“I will rescue them. Please insure that no one else tries such an irrational thing.”

Then the Factor was off.

Moving faster than any human could have, he covered the distance to the Mill in a blur.

At the entrance doors he looked up. Like a falling moon his ship had descended. Even now it was beginning to discharge the retardant. Without choice the Factor went in.

Here on the first floor the only signs of the fire were smoke and hot dead air. With crystal-clear memory the Factor summoned up the location of the stairs. In seconds he had gained the second floor; seconds later, the third.

A smoky crackling inferno greeted him at the head of the stairs. The incredible popping noise of destructing bricks resounded sharply at intervals. Heat assaulted his senses, and he could barely see. He switched to infrared. The loci of flames leapt out of the confusion. Stepping out onto the floor the Factor set out to find the men, who he was fairly certain would have rushed uselessly here, to the center of the disaster.

All the ceiling timbers above the Factor were ablaze. He heard the rain of chemicals descending, but knew that this third floor at least would definitely be lost, no matter what.

“Otterness!” bellowed the Factor. “Cairncross! Where are you? There is no need!”

The Factor’s supersensitive hearing seemed to distinguish faint calls from deep within the Mill. He pushed on, ignoring the flames that frequently lapped at him. Twice he had to lift a fallen flaming timber from his path.

Emerging from one such barrier into a relatively clear eddy, the Factor realized he had come upon the men.

Oddly, there seemed to be three. The Factor switched back to normal vision to resolve the discrepancy.

Yes, three men struggled in a mass. One was the elder Cairncross. He held a can of oil in his hands with which he fed the flames. Trying to restrain him were Charley and Otterness. But the wild man's strength seemed indomitable, and he continued to sprinkle his oil like a satanic priest asperging his congregation of devils.

The Factor rushed forward and effortlessly scooped up Charley and Otterness like two weightless sacks, tossing them over his shoulders.

Charley's father, now released, raked them all with a final frantic glare and, letting forth a tremulous soul-bursting scream comprised of years of pent-up inexpungable frustration and bitterness, hurled himself headlong into the nearest flames.

"Da!" screamed Charley, and tried to break free. But the Factor held him tight. Gripping the men with steely strength, the Factor turned and made for the stairs. He moved so fast and unerringly through the least damaging flames that by the time he emerged out into the open air Charley and Otterness had suffered only minor smoke inhalation and burns.

Depositing his burdens upon their own shaky feet, the Factor turned toward the Mill. His ship was dropping mechanical remote units into the building through the gaps in the roof to battle the remaining spot fires. Everything seemed under control.

Sensing a vast crowd behind him, the Factor turned to confront it. Surprisingly he saw that their shocked attention was concentrated on him rather than the subsiding conflagration. Raising a hand to command them, he realized why.

The Factor's suit had burned away in many spots. So had much of his artificial flesh. The hidden titanium armatures that articulated him shone through. Touching his face he found it gone.

"It is all right," the Factor said. The people backed away unconsciously when he spoke out of his charred indestructible self. "It is all right," the Factor uselessly repeated. "The fire is under control. Everything will be as it was."

But even as he said it, he knew it wasn't true.

At the mouth of the Valley, the caravan came to a halt. The lead steam-carriage, an elegant Whaleford six-passenger landau, shuddered to a stop, bringing the ones behind it—a mixed lot of cargo carriers, with tents lashed to their roofs—to an obedient standstill. Geartrains disengaged, the cars thrummed with the silent power of their coal-fired Tarcat boilers.

The lead vehicle, as were all the others, was emblazoned with the gilt crest of Factor's Head University: a blank-eyed mechanical face replete with fanciful rivets, surmounted by a depiction of the constellation known as Factor's Ship. Completing the heraldry was a banner bearing the motto: "Growth From Ashes." The hood of the landau bore a silver ornament in the shape of a wainwalker, those stolid beasts gone these many years from the streets of Tarrytown City where the University was located.

The doors of the landau swung open now, revealing plush- padded inner panels, and its passengers emerged into the bright summer sunlight. Overhead, a soaring cliff kestrel banked and let out a scream.

The driver of the Whaleford was a middle-aged man dressed still in the professorial garb he affected when in the classroom: a lightweight vested suit of flaxen dreamworm cloth, imported from the tropics, and a pair of ankle-high leather boots. In this conservative outfit he resembled any of his fellow pedants. Only in his choice of neckwear did he exhibit any oddity or individuality of taste. For the man wore an antique tie made of the old-fashioned stuff known as lux. In the light of the sun it cast its own radiance. An expert in antiquities had confirmed family legends regarding the tie: it was a blend of Palefire and Idlenorth fibers, one of the last fabrics ever created by the defunct Mill.

Now the passengers of the lead car—four men and two women—were joined by others from the cargo vehicles. These latter folk were plainly laborers. Together, the crowd faced north. Shading their eyes, they raised their faces to the sky.

Someone whistled; a woman gasped; one of the laborers said, "I'll be a fur-faced abo—"

The driver of the landau spoke. "It's impressive, all right. Especially up this close. I've had the Factor's Head explain it to me a dozen times now, and I still don't understand the exact nature of what keeps it up there. I don't think well be ready to grasp it for another generation or two. But remember—strange as it seems to us, it's only science."

What captivated the visitors to the Valley was the sight of the Factor’s mother ship. Suspended like a lost silver moon above the ruins of the Mill halfway up the Valley, it hung as motionless as a mountain. The only evidence of any sort of imperfection was several open hatches. Thus it had remained for decades, tenantless and unvisited, by either planet-dweller or one of its mates from the stars.

The leader of the expedition spoke again. “Well, we’d best continue. We need to set up camp before nightfall, and we’ve still got a few miles to go to reach the site. And if the old road ahead is anything like what we’ve traversed so far, it’ll be slow going. This is hardly the Grand Concourse. No pavement here.”

“Nor no ladies of low virtue either,” added one of the laborers, provoking much laughter which served to relieve the slight tension they had all been feeling.

The crowd broke up. One of the other drivers opened wide the door of his vehicle’s boiler, exposing the open flame to add more fuel. At that moment, someone shouted.

“Professor Cairncross! Look!”

From out of the undergrowth paralleling the track emerged a squat mechanism. Big as a footstool, it moved stiffly on three spidery legs, advancing on the carrier with the open firebox.

The intruder was suddenly the focus of a dozen rifles and pistols carried as protection against dire wolves and other wildlife. Professor Cairncross stopped the men before they could fire.

“No, don’t—I think I know what it is.…”

The automaton homed in unerringly on the open flames. Once upon them, it swivelled a nozzle at the heat source. A sound of dry pumping ensued. After a few moments of this fruitless activity, the little mechanism lowered its nozzle in defeat, collapsed its legs underneath itself, and sank to the ground.

“Let’s go,” said Professor Cairncross. “And remember, whatever curious things we may see, they’ll all be as harmless as what you’ve just witnessed.”

In the car and once more in motion, the passengers of the landau were silent for a time. Then one of the women spoke.

“Are you really so certain, Charles, that we won’t encounter any dangers?”

“Basically, Jennifer, I am. The oral history and the written accounts all tally. The Factor’s ship never disgorged anything except him, his lighter and the clockwork firefighters. It’s true that after the Valley emptied other constructs may have landed, but it seems highly unlikely. It was all under the Factor’s control, and once he suffered his fate, he was unable to contact his ship via the lighter. He’s told me so often enough. And though one must always take the Head’s talk with a grain of salt—the damage it suffered manifests itself in strange ways—I’m inclined to believe him in this case.”

“Well, you certainly sounded confident enough. I’m sure the workers were heartened.”

Professor Cairncross appeared embarrassed. “Just part of my job, after all. We wouldn’t have much success in our dig if we were always looking over our shoulders for some alien menace. No, I expect that the most well meet will be a few friendly ghosts.”

The road was indeed nearly impassable in spots. The expedition had to stop often to fell with axes the larger trees which had grown on the median strip; the centuries-compacted dirt ruts had proved more impenetrable to seedlings. Through the dense foliage running alongside the old track, they could catch occasional glimpses of the Mill and its many associated dwellings, the residences all broken-roofed and shatter-windowed. They encountered no more ancient firefighters, but the going was still slow. It took till dusk to reach the site selected by Professor Cairncross and his fellow archaeologists.

The Field of the Festival was nearly all overgrown with copses of sapodilla and jacaranda. However, a grassy clearing about the size of a ballfield remained, not far from the road. Here they chose to pitch their tents, leaving the vehicles lined up in the track.

While the tents were being raised, Professor Cairncross took Jennifer and the rest of his University colleagues on a beeline across the tree-dotted field. What directed him, he found hard to say. Surely hours of studying old maps had a lot to do with his certainty, as did hours of listening to his grandfather and namesake ramble on in his half-cogent, half-dotty way about life in the Mill Valley. But there was more guiding him than these

things; it was an instinct almost genetic, a rising of ancestral feelings and memories.

Within minutes they had come upon the Factor's little ship, trees growing right up to its walls. Grass—having sprouted in wind-deposited soil on the very ramp—licked at the door, into which leaves had blown. The scat of some animal wafted pungently from inside the vessel.

Professor Cairncross's excitement was nearly palpable, and transmitted itself to the others. Sweaty, dressed for city streets rather than cross-country trekking, their faces showing the rising welts from branches, his comrades did not protest when he said, "Let's press on, toward the Mill. I want to find the Factor's skeleton."

They burst from the marge of the woods, and stopped. The oily waste strip had resisted organic encroachments much more easily, and only the toughest weeds grew there. They had an unobstructed view in the gold and purple twilight of the sad, silent, sag-roofed Mill, parts of it crumbled by flooding of the Swolebourne, its middle portion still exhibiting the effects of the fire that had unmasked the Factor and precipitated his demise and the abandonment of the Mill.

Professor Cairncross scanned the waste fruitlessly. Then Jennifer said, "There, that glint—"

The metal armature of the Factor was wreathed in maidenhair, as if the earth strove to clothe it.

Professor Cairncross shivered. "I can feel it as if it were yesterday. I'd sit on my gran'da's knee, and he'd tell me how the Factor was decapitated with a dozen blows from a huge wrench, wielded by his old boss, Otterness. Once I thought I'd found the very wrench, an old rusty thing in my father's shop. But it turned out to be much too new. I think I'd date my desire to do archaeology to that moment."

Jennifer said, "And look where it's led you. To something much more exciting than an old wrench!"

Back at the camp, a fire was already going. All throughout supper, they half expected more clockwork visitors, starting at every sound from the surrounding woods. But in this they were disappointed.

As he fell asleep in Jennifer's arms that night—their betrothal had been announced last month, and it had not taken them long to get a jump on the actual marriage—Professor Cairncross thought wistfully how wonderful it

was that this expedition, the first such, could include women. The Head's revelation a generation ago of the dietary deficiency that had limited female births for so long, and how to correct it, was having far-reaching changes already.…

In the morning, Professor Cairncross arose before the others, with first light. He felt the need to be alone with his thoughts and emotions.

Wandering away from the camp without any intentions, he soon found himself among the brick houses of a Village. In one such, his ancestors had passed their whole lives. It was nearly inconceivable.…

Outside the Village, he came upon an old midden of waste bricks, nearly concealed by vegetation. Time and the elements had softened what must have once been a formidable pile. Moved by some urge he could not explain, excitement mounting in his breast, Professor Cairncross climbed awkwardly to the top. It took only a few adult steps.

Yet when he stood atop the brick pile, sourceless tears tickling his cheeks, he felt master of all he surveyed, and king of the world.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is the most autobiographical story I have ever written. Many of my relatives were employed in New England textile mills, before those milk closed their doors in the wake of, first, the industry's flight toward cheaper conditions in the southern United States, and, more recently, foreign competition. I myself spent a fair number of summers earning college tuition in such a clangorous, dusty, dangerous setting. But as I try to convey in this story, the old milltown communities—mostly vanished already by the time I encountered their sparse remnants—had their own allure, a kind of tight-knit (pun intentional) camaraderie of the working man, many of whom gratefully fled the uncertainty of rural existences for indoor work and the security of a steady paycheck.

The Industrial Revolution—and hence in a sense science fiction itself—was led by the textile industry and its quest to automate ancient processes. But that era has come and gone. Our world will never see such all-encompassing mills again.

But will the future? Perhaps, perhaps.

In its first draft, this story ended with the fourth section. I owe editor Kim Mohan thanks for urging me to write the necessary coda.

THE GRANGE

“Look,” said Lucy, “the moon—”

Edward laid down his newspaper and looked up in the sky, where his wife was pointing. A waxing crescent moon, pale as a mermaid’s face, thin as a willow whip, was visible in the translucent blue heavens, trailing the noontime sun by some twenty-five degrees.

“Pretty,” said Edward, making to lift up his paper again.

“Pretty?” Lucy demanded. “Is that all you have to say?”

“What else should I say?”

“Well, what’s it doing up there now? Isn’t that weird? I mean, look, the sun’s still up. It’s only lunchtime.”

Edward slowly folded his newspaper into quarters, stalling for a few seconds. His mind was disordered; his fine intellect, complex as a cat’s cradle, had come completely unknotted in an instant. Lucy did this to him. Even after fifteen years of marriage, she still did this to him. All it took most times was a single utterance winging unexpectedly out of the conversational blue, or an idiosyncratic action. The day she had asked him what ocean Atlantic City fronted on.… Her puzzlement about why one had to apply the brakes when going into a curve.… The hurt incomprehension she had exhibited when she destroyed the microwave oven by trying to warm up a can of soup.…

It was at such times that Edward found himself utterly speechless, baffled by the unfathomable workings of Lucy’s mind. She was quite clever in many ways. That much must be granted. And it wasn’t a lack of logic she exhibited. Far from it. It was a kind of otherworldly, Carrollian logic she possessed, something utterly alien to his rational method of thinking.

He had believed he understood her before their wedding. They had, after all, known each other for most of their lives. Had been the traditional high school sweethearts, in fact. Surely such a long intimacy should have bred comprehension.

What a naive and pompous young idiot he had been! He realized quite fully now that he did not understand her at all, not in the slightest. Would never understand her. But he loved her, and that, he supposed, would have to suffice.

Trying to come up with a rational response to Lucy's objections to the moon's sharing of the sun's domain, Edward studied her where she lay. Reclining on a folding, towel-padded aluminum lawn chair, she wore the smallest of two-piece swimsuits. Her graceful limbs and slim torso were thoroughly oiled and buttered. Her small tummy resembled a shining golden hill, her sweat-filled navel a mysterious well or spring atop it. She was levered partway up on her right elbow and forearm, her eyes shaded with her left hand, facing Edward expectantly.

Knowing full well that it was all in vain, Edward tried to explain.

"There is no reason why the moon cannot be up at the same time as the sun. Because of the special way the sun and the moon and the earth spin around each other, the moon rises at a different time each day—"

"The moon rises?"

"Yes."

"It isn't just always there, but you see it only when the sun goes down?"

Edward sighed deeply. "No. Now pay attention. If, one night, it rises at, say 11:00 PM, the next night it will rise later. Pretty soon it will be rising during the day, like now. Eventually it will go back to rising at night."

"Why should it work in such a complicated way?"

"Gravity—"

"Stop right there. You know I don't understand that word."

"Well, then, you'll never understand why the moon can be up during the day."

Lucy flopped back onto the lawn chair. "Maybe I don't want to understand. Maybe you're wrong. Maybe this is a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence, and you just think you've seen the moon in the daytime before."

Edward started to get irritated. "Listen, I know what I know. The moon is often up during the daytime. I've seen it a hundred times, if I've seen it once."

"You're pulling my leg."

"No, honest, I'm not."

"Well, I've never seen it before."

"You've seen it now."

"Now is not always. Like you keep saying, 'One item does not make a series'."

“Look for it tomorrow, then, if you don’t believe me.”

“Just forget it, then.”

“Maybe I’ll do just that.”

Edward tried to resume reading his paper. For some reason he had lost all relish for it. In the back of his mind was a nagging uncertainty. Had he ever seen the moon by day before…?

Lucy spoke sleepily. “Why don’t you take off that silly hat and get some sun?”

“I don’t want to burn.”

“You stayed blanched all those summers we lived in the city. You should enjoy our new country life.”

Edward had just received tenure at an urban-campused Ivy League college in the Northeast, where he taught philosophy. He and Lucy had promptly bought an old farmhouse forty-five minutes south of the city, in a sparsely populated district where cows outnumbered humans. Their property included five acres, one of which was lawn, the other four being scrub growth.

The time of the year was the first week of June.

“I can’t see the sense of getting all greased up to lie mindlessly for hours in the sun.”

“It feels good.”

“I suppose.”

“In fact, it feels so good that I’m taking off my suit. It’s silly to wear it, out here in the middle of nowhere.”

“Lucy, I don’t know—”

But it was too late. In a mere second, Lucy had skinned out of her bikini. The twin white premises of her breasts and the conclusion of her pale pubic delta formed a wordless syllogism whose validity was insusceptible to proof.

Still, Edward felt professionally compelled to try.

Later that afternoon, after a lunch of curried chicken-salad sandwiches and Chardonnay, Lucy said, “You know what? I think I’m going to start a garden. It’ll give me something to do.”

“A garden? You’ve never grown anything before.”

“That was when we lived in the city. Things are different now.”

“What kind of garden? Flowers or vegetables?”

“Both.”

“How will you even know where to begin?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’ll ask around. Maybe there’s one of those whatchamacallits around here.”

“I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t be obtuse. You know what I mean.”

“I do?”

“The place where the farmers get together for their hoedowns or hootenannies or whatever.”

“A Grange.”

“Yes, that’s it. A Grange.”

* * * *

It was odd, this living in the country. Very strange and disturbing to the intellect. Nature had an effect. Yes, it must be admitted. The mind, much as it might like to think it was sovereign and independent, was hooked up to the body; and the body, in turn, was merely a quivering antenna receptive to a bewildering variety of sensory inputs. And out here, away from the city, amidst a wild profusion of growing things, of hidden, scurrying animals, of running water and blind stones migrating upward through the soil, the inputs were different. More persuasive in a subtle way—although perhaps less blatant—than car horns and advertisements, sirens and the smell of restaurants.

But there was more to it than individual stimuli, or even the sum of the novel sensations. There were the underlying patterns to consider, the ancient cycles and the total ecology of nature. Take just the seasons, for instance. In the city, they passed almost unnoticed. Street trees donned and doffed their cloaks of leaves, and no one paid any attention. Pigeons did not fly south for the winter. Any river big enough to notice was too big to ice over. Flowers were something one bought already cut and bundled.

Out here in the country, though, it was different. In just the couple of months that they had been living here, Edward had become attuned to the progress of the summer. In a way that was almost sly and sneaky, things changed. Plants that, a few weeks ago in May, had been tiny shoots were now monstrous weeds, bearing heavy, randy blossoms never bred by man. Where there had once been a clear line of sight from the front porch to the

mailbox, there was now an impenetrable greenness. The sun now rose above that ancient oak, whereas formerly it had of a morning crowned that other. (Elm, sycamore, ash? How could one tell?)

And the way the discrete elements of the environment related to each other.… When the trumpet vine that climbed the tumbled stone wall along the eastern edge of their land had blossomed, the hummingbirds had materialized from nowhere. How had they known to come? The ants that stripped the chewed carcass that might have been a possum—what had summoned them? The cloud of delicate dandelion parasol seeds—what fitted them to be carried by the wind?

There was a kind of mindless fecundity behind it all, an inexhaustible and exuberant organic experimentation. What was it the writer Annie Dillard had said? That nature was "wasteful and extravagant of life.…" That seemed about right.

Edward had noticed unmistakable changes in himself since their residency here. For one thing, his attention was more liable to drift from his work. He had fall-semester classes to prepare, scholarly papers to write, a book to outline. (It was to be a volume of philosophy for the layman, hopefully very popular, like what Sagan and Gould had done in their fields) Despite these demands, he found himsellf spending useless hours outdoors, wandering along the game trails that threaded the adjoining woods, his mind wandering likewise, unable to focus on the work at hand.

(But was it totally empty during these walks, or rather, working in a different way, examining different, wordless topics…?)

And then, of course, there were the changes in Lucy. Back in the city, during his untenured years, she had done part-time librarian work to supplement his pay, and spent most of her free time as an expert shopper. Since the increase in his income and their subsequent relocation, she had quit her job and completely lost interest in the local stores or the more distant, inevitable mall. All it seemed she wanted to do was vegetate in the sun. That, or cook these intricate, peasant-type meals for them. Supper might be a big pot of thick stew and a crusty whole-grain loaf, still hot from the oven. Breakfast an omelet round and golden as the sun accompanied by cornbread made with white meal and cooked in a cast-iron skillet in the oven, emerging like a scorched harvest moon.

Edward found himself putting on weight, like some country squire.

And now there was this matter of a garden. It was the last thing Edward would have predicted Lucy would want. (Of course, when had he ever been able to guess what she would do next?) It was certainly a harmless enough hobby. Maybe she would find some local folks who might provide her with company on days when he was working.

As for his own inability to concentrate—well, there was bound to be a period of adjustment connected with such major changes in their lives. Edward was certain that any day now he would be back to his old self.

Meanwhile, though, perhaps he'd just go out for a stroll.…

* * * *

Car tires chewed noisily on the gravel in the drive. Edward looked up gratefully from the disorganized pile of papers on his desk. Splotchy sunlight, filtered by the leaves of the large oak just outside the window, carpeted the varnished floor of his study with a pattern of shadow. The house had seemed empty without Lucy. Maybe now that she was home, they could go for a walk together. It wasn't as if he were accomplishing anything sitting here.…

Stepping beyond the wooden screen door onto the wide porch that wrapped itself around three-quarters of the old house, Edward was met by Lucy bounding up the steps from the verdant lawn. She grabbed him and whirled him around in a crazy little dance.

"I found it, I found it, I found it!"

Stepping back dizzily when released, Edward said, "My God, it could only be Leibniz's universal calculus—"

"No, dummy, the Grange."

Edward took Lucy's hand, and they went into the cool indoors.

"I stopped in at the Blue Label feedstore and asked the man there. He said there was a Grange in town. It's one of the oldest branches, in fact. They meet in that brick building with the waterwheel that we wondered about. It used to be a real flour mill hundreds of years ago, even before World War I."

"That old, huh?"

"Yes. And tonight there's going to be a meeting that the public can attend. At least the first part. The Grange is a society, you know. You have to be members before you can go to every meeting and function. But if we go

tonight and show some interest, I think they'll ask us to join. The feedstore man said that most of the members were pretty old, and that they were always looking for younger people to belong."

"I guess we qualify, then. Anyway, I know you make me feel pretty young."

Edward grabbed Lucy's ass.

"About sixteen years old I would estimate," she said.

"You should remember."

"Oh, I do."

Later Edward was motivated to pull down the proper volume of the Encyclopedia Americana and look up:

"GRANGE, one of the general farm organizations in the United States, formerly known as the Patrons of Husbandry. It is a secret, ritualistic society. Established in 1867 in Washington, D.C., by Oliver Hudson Kelley and six associates, its officers bear the titles of Grange Master, Overseer, Chaplain, Secretary, Treasurer, Steward, and Gatekeeper.…"

Neat, thought Edward. Each of the original seven founders got to be an officer. That's my kind of club.…

Evening filled the woods with twilight. The tall trees surrounding the farmhouse—where the porch light defined a small circle of artificial day—had become towering, shadowy masses, rustling in a light breeze, seeming to exhale waves of moist coolness. Crickets chirruped. A chorus of falsetto frogs peeped cheerfully in a distant swamp. Stars began to burn through the canopy of night. The scent of new-mown grass filled Edward's nostrils as he and Lucy walked to the car. The crew of locals that maintained their property had been by that afternoon.

Just where the lawn met the gravel of the driveway, Lucy stopped. "Edward, look at this."

Edward saw an irregular ring of beautiful white mushrooms, each about three inches high, phallus-capped, rearing proudly above the mower-shortened blades of grass. They limned a hollow moon.

"The men must have missed it," he said, knowing even as he said it, as he stared unbelievingly at the cut grass beneath the ring, that he was not speaking the truth.

"No," Lucy said, "these things can sprout up fast. I've heard about them."

"In a couple of hours?"

“There it is.”

“Well,” said Edward, “Maybe they’re good to eat.”

“Oh no, we can’t pick them—”

Edward decided not to mention that the landscapers would decapitate them next week.

Lucy drove them into town. She liked driving; Edward didn’t. He tried to restrain his foot from pressing an imaginary brake pedal each time she took a curve.

The car radio played softly, a pop song sung by a nasal Australian voice:

I have the moon in my bed,
I have the sun in my heart,
I have the stars at my feet.…

There was a sizable parking lot attached to the old mill. Normally vacant those few times Edward had driven by, it was nearly full tonight. Lucy found an empty slot. The cars were those models Edward associated with his parents’ generation: conservative Buicks, Oldsmobiles, Chevys.

Edward could read the bumper sticker on one, in the illumination of a streetlight:

HOWDY,STRANGER!
I’M A GRANGER!

“Corny.”

“Be nice. These aren’t academics. They’re a different kind of people from any we know.”

At the door to the mill, they were not far from the grassy banks of the stream that had once spun the wheel that had turned the grindstones in their immemorial embrace. The water flowed with a serene chuckling over weed-draped rocks and between reeds and rushes, its clean odor lying lightly on the night air.

The interior of the mill had long ago been subdivided into offices and meeting rooms. Here and there, portions of the original pegged beams showed through, like the skeleton of an old, old story poking its elbows through its modern dress. Everything was freshly painted and well-lit with modern fixtures. Edward and Lucy made their way down a corridor—corkboard hung with notices of farm equipment for sale, a table holding ag-school bulletins and a box full of food coupons for exchange, a forgotten

pair of galoshes under the empty coat hooks—toward a room from which voices drifted.

The hall held fifty wood-slatted folding chairs, nearly all occupied. Edward and Lucy slid into a pair of empty seats at the back in what they hoped was an inconspicuous way.

Looking toward the front of the room, Edward saw a wooden dais bearing a table and seven chairs. The chairs were occupied by four old women and three old men. Each wore a yellow-and-white satin sash across their elderly chest. Their average age seemed about seventy. The woman in the middle, although remarkably unwrinkled, had to be in her nineties.…

The backdrop behind the Grange leaders was a green cloth on which was stitched a golden stalk of grain.

The meeting was already under way. One of the officers was detailing the status of the treasury in exquisitely tedious detail. Edward settled back into his chair, quite prepared to be very bored.

The next forty-five minutes didn't disappoint him. Accounts of planned fund-raising activities, the success of a recent dance, news of crop prices, the formation of a committee to do political work for the Grange-backed candidate in the upcoming presidential election.…

Edward was just drifting off to sleep, when he was reprieved.

"This concludes the first half of tonight's Grange meeting," said one of the officers. "We will break for ten minutes. I must remind the general public that the second half of the meeting is closed to them."

Chairs scraped as people got to their feet. Edward stood. One leg had gone to sleep and now prickled painfully.

"Can we go now?"

"In a minute. We want to introduce ourselves first."

"We do?" Looking to his wife for an answer, Edward was taken aback.

Lucy's eyes were shining, as if the boring meeting had been some kind of rapturous experience for her. She seemed drawn to the people on the stage.

Edward shrugged and accompanied her up front.

From old-fashioned wall-mounted Seeburg speakers issued barely discernible music. Edward thought he recognized the old English ballad "John Barleycorn Must Die".

The officers had descended from the stage and now stood among the respectful crowd, softly conferring among themselves. Lucy approached the

nearest, one of the men.

"Hello,"she said, extending her hand. "My name's Lucy Pastorious, and this is my husband, Edward."

The white-haired man shook first Lucy's hand, then Edward's, and introduced himself. "Calvin Culver. I'm the Grange's Sower."

Had that been one of the Grange titles? Edward couldn't be sure, but he didn't think so.

"We're new residents of the town," continued Lucy, "and we're interested in joining the Grange."

Edward had an impression that he and Lucy were being instantly appraised, and found not too alien. Culver seemed honestly pleased at their interest. "We're always glad to see some young faces round here. The Grange can't go on without new blood. I don't think there'd be any problem about you two joining. Let me just introduce you to the rest of the sashes."

Culver turned toward his fellow officers and named them one by one.

"This is Betty Rhinebeck, our Attendant."

"Roger Swain, our Presbyter."

"Alice Cotten, our Thresher."

"Edwin Landseer, our Plowman."

"Nancy Rook, our Sluicekeeper."

When Edward had finished shaking the fifth papery, dry old hand and making his fifth polite hello, he was certain of one thing. None of these titles were the same as the ones he had earlier found in the encyclopedia. Was this Grange a chapter of the Patrons of Husbandry, or was it a branch of some different organization? Had the titles changed with time? Or were false ones given to the public? If the latter, it seemed a needlessly mysterious practice.…

Edward suddenly realized that there remained one officer left to be introduced: the most senior woman, who had sat in the middle of the others. It occurred to Edward now that she had been the only one to remain unspeaking throughout the meeting.

Culver shepherded Lucy with evidence of great respect up to the small, trim woman. "This is Sally Lunn, The Grain Mistress."

Grain Mistress…? What had happened to Grange Master?

Edward watched Lucy extend her hand. The woman took it, her simultaneously old and young face broadening into a smile showcasing

perfect teeth. “So pleased to meet you at last, Mrs. Pastorious,” said Sally Lunn.

Lucy’s lips were slightly parted, as if she had started to speak but had her thought processes short-circuited. Sally Lunn released Lucy’s hand, which continued to hang for a moment in midair.

Before he knew what was happening, Lucy had staggered back, and Edward had been invited forward.

“Edward,” said Sally Lunn, “my pleasure.” Then she took his hand.

His mind was somewhere deep under the earth. The rich smell of soil filled his nose, and cool clods sealed his eyes. He could blindly sense a twinned presence high above his head, calling him up. He struggled upward through the clinging loam, grew taller, taller, until he burst forth, into the ecstatic light, mingled gold and opal—

His hand and self were his own again. Somehow they were at the exit to the mill, having been escorted there by Calvin Culver.

“Sorry you folks have to leave now. But something tells me there won’t be any problem about you joining. No siree, none at all.”

* * * *

Edward contemplated his breakfast. Lucy had cooked a pot of Wheatena with raisins. She had mounded a hill of the gritty golden cereal into a bowl, deposited a dollop of honey into the center of it, and splashed a moat of milk into the bowl.

The golden hill and white ring around it had Edward mesmerized, as if it were an intricate mandala containing infinite depths of meaning.

Reluctantly, he jerked his attention away from the absolutely mundane image. Picking up his spoon, he broke through the dike containing the honey, let it runnel away into the milk, a golden thread. He stirred the whole mixture up into an amorphous mess and began to eat.

The cereal tasted especially sweet this morning, the day after they had attended the Grange.

Lucy sat down at the table, picked up her spoon, and dipped it into her own cereal. “Well, what about it?”

Edward was taken aback. He hadn’t expected Lucy to beard him so soon about what they had agreed last night to postpone discussing. But he should

have known, given her obvious excitement at the Grange meeting, that she would wait only the barest minimum of time.

Edward feigned ignorance. “About what?”

“Don’t be an ape. What about us joining the Grange?”

Edward looked sheepishly down into his bowl. There was no way out of it now. “I don’t think I want to.”

“Let me guess why. You’ve got no time?”

“Well, yes, there’s that.…”

“You aren’t interested in the kind of things they do and talk about?”

“I suppose you could say that.…”

“You don’t like the people? You think they’re clodhoppers?”

“Well, now, I wouldn’t go that far.…”

“You had the stuffing scared out of you by Sally Lunn?”

Edward said nothing. He looked up to find Lucy entreating him with shining eyes.

“Don’t be scared, Edward. I felt it, too. I don’t know what it was, but it was nothing to be frightened of. It was something entirely natural and good. I think maybe it was just some kind of saintliness or wisdom that comes, if you’re lucky, when you get as old as she is. Maybe it has to do with her living out here in the country all her life. Whatever it was, I liked it. It made me feel good, like I understood for the first time what the world is all about. Sometimes I don’t, you know. Sometimes, in fact, I think everyone but me knows the secret of how things work. You with all your talk about gravity, the way the plumber yelled at me that time I put the plaster down the drains — I get tired of feeling like such a big dope all the time. So I’m going to join the Grange. And that’s that.”

Edward struggled to speak. Lucy’s words had made him sad. Did she really feel like that? Was he partly responsible?

“Lucy, I want you to be happy. Do whatever you want. I’ll be glad if you join the Grange. But I just can’t. You see, when you touched that old woman’s hand you felt confirmed in everything you knew. But I felt just the opposite. I felt as if a pit of quicksand had opened up underfoot, as if the whole world I had known and accepted as solid and rational were a sham—which can’t be true. The old woman twisted my vision somehow and showed me everything in a new, unreasoning light. All the careful work I’ve put into explaining the world to myself and others was undone in a

second. Maybe it was just momentary self-hypnosis. But I can’t go through that again.”

“And what,”Lucy asked, “if she was showing you the truth?”

“I think,”said Edward, “that I’d rather not accept that as a possibility.”

Lucy scraped the last of her cereal up methodically and swallowed it. “That’s fair, I guess. Will you at least help me with my kitchen garden?”. She licked the bowl of her spoon sensuously like a big, lazy cat.

“Unfair tactics, and not strictly necessary. Of course I will.”

“Good. I’m going into town and look up Mr. Calvin Culver, our Sower and tell him I’m in if they’ll have me. You can work off a little of the spare tire you’re accumulating by getting the grass up from that plot I marked near the back steps.”

And with that, Lucy was gone.

Spare tire? And who had been feeding him such rich meals, as if fattening him up for a sacrifice? Was there no justice?

Edward did the breakfast dishes and went outside.

Even this early in the morning, the June sun was overpoweringly hot, a celestial bonfire. Soon Edward had his shirt off. The sharp, untried, shiny blade of the pointed shovel easily severed the ancient turf demarcated by stakes and string. Edward picked up each heavy clod by its green hair—disturbingly like a severed head—shook the moist earth from its roots, and tossed it aside. Fat and juicy flesh-colored earthworms, some truncated by his blade, wriggled away into the earth.

After some time, Edward had exposed a square of black earth some twenty feet on a side to the sun’s curious stare. The gaze of the deity was already turning the soil a different, lighter shade as it dried. The pile of turfs made a small warrior’s barrow.

Edward was resting on his shovel, his back glistening with sweat, when Lucy called out. “Hello! Come help me!”

Rather wearily, Edward went around to the front of the house. Lucy was struggling with some handled device sticking out of the car’s trunk.

“I rented a Rototiller,”she explained. “It’ll save us some work.”

“Us?”

“We’re a team, aren’t we?”

Edward wrestled the machine to the ground. “And your role on the team is —?”

“I’m the fructifying force.”

Edward stopped in midmotion, astonished. “‘Fructifying’? Where the hell did that come from? Good old Calvin Culver? Are you sure you don’t mean __”

“Don’t say it. You’ve got a filthy mind. Just do a good job, and you’ll get your reward.”

“Oh, by the way,”she added as he wheeled the machine off, “I’m a Grange member now.”

The Rototiller, despite its noise and stink, did make the job easier. Still, there were what seemed to be thousands of stones to bend over for and pluck from the newly turned earth. In a couple of hours, they soon formed a companion cairn to the sod barrow.

When it was over, Edward had never felt so tired in his life. Every muscle in his arms and legs and back ached. So this was the pastoral life. Ah, Arcadia! The city had never looked so fine.…

“Edward,”called Lucy from the back porch. He turned, hoping she had brought something cool for him to drink.

She wore a circlet of daisies in her hair. And nothing else. Her body glowed white and tan as if lit from within. She stepped down the stairs with a motion like water falling. The air around her appeared to shiver. She crossed the lawn, her bare feet seeming to imprint the grass with a brighter greenness.

Edward was mesmerized. He felt hot and cold at once. Then his unknown wife, her eyes filmed with a cool light, was upon him, unbuckling his pants, finding him unsurprisingly ready, and pulling him down to the broken soil.

The earth was cool and moist beneath his knees and palms. He wondered briefly what it felt like to supine Lucy. Then there was nothing left of him to wonder.

When it was over, Edward had never felt so refreshed in his life. Every muscle in his arms and legs and back throbbed with vitality. So this was the pastoral life.…

“You don’t pay the lawn-maintenance guys this way, do you?”

Lucy wasn’t listening to him. She was looking up into the infinite sky. Edward cast his own gaze over his shoulder, and saw the moon watching them.

“Now it will blossom,”Lucy said.

That same evening, Lucy announced she was going out.

“There’s a Grange meeting tonight.”

“So soon?”

“It’s an emergency. We have to deal with the gypsy moths.”

“You mean those stupid caterpillars that are chewing up all the trees? I thought there was nothing that stopped them short of spraying. And the town council’s voted against that.”

“Sally has a plan.”

Lucy was gone till after midnight. When she crawled into their bed, beneath the down comforter the country nights still made a necessity, Edward came half-awake.

“How’d it go?”he murmured sleepily.

“Shhh, go back to sleep. I’ll tell you in the morning.”

But in the morning there was no need to ask, for the gypsy moths lay dead in heaps everywhere.

* * * *

All work on his book had gone by the board. Edward found he couldn’t concentrate on what had once seemed so important to him. It wasn’t the environment that was distracting him anymore, though. At least not firsthand. He had realized with a start, soon after the wild coupling with Lucy on the garden bed, that his senses had become harmonized to the natural world somehow, had achieved a rapprochement with the forces of sunlight and soil, leaf and limb. These forces did not make the same demands on his attention as they had when they were new to him. He found he could go about his daily living without paying much attention to the bewitching, continually varying play of light and odors around him.

Not that Nature had vanished or retreated from the back of his mind or the depths of his gut. No, that had not happened, no more than one’s heart or lungs had ceased to function, simply because they went hourly unheard.

No, what preoccupied Edward now was trying to find out what Lucy had gotten herself involved in.

What exactly was this organization known as the Grange?

Here and now, in mid-June, this question—along with its corollary, Was the Grange good or bad for his wife?—filled all of Edward’s mind. He attacked it the only way he knew how, short of confronting the Grange

members themselves (something he was surprisingly reluctant to do), and that was through research.

Every morning, Edward set out for the city, leaving Lucy behind to tend to her garden. He worried about what she might be getting up to, picturing her reenacting their fructifying ritual, only with other partners. Then he would admonish himself for a fool. Lucy, despite her newfound interest in matters horticultural, was still the same woman he had always known, and wouldn't do that to him. Besides, any such activity would surely crush the tiny seedlings that now sprouted where Edward and Lucy had tumbled, and even the sturdier shoots of the transplanted tomatoes, and Lucy wouldn't stand for that. The garden seemed to be her whole life lately. In the end, there was nothing Edward could or would do if she wanted to rut all day, so he dismissed it from his mind as best he could.

On the campus, moving from stack to dusty stack in the various familiar libraries where he had spent so much time—and which now seemed so alien—Edward sought answers to the meaning of the Grange and what it stood for.

He confirmed in detail the brief encyclopedia entry he had read on that day, seemingly ages gone by. The Grange, if this was indeed the same one, had been the brainchild of Oliver Hudson Kelley in 1867. (The word "grange"came from the same Latin root as "grain", *granum*, and meant merely a storehouse for grain.) He dug into Kelley's past. The man had been an immigrant; his father Irish, his mother French. There the personal trail petered out. Edward switched to the public practices of the Grange.

On the surface, the Grange's history was one of promoting solidarity among farmers, for the benefit of both individual farmers and farmers as a class. Antitrust, transportation, and education laws were agitated for; cooperatives established; research promoted. There was a social side to the Grange, too. Dances, harvest suppers, lectures. It all seemed extremely innocuous today—although, of course, at the time, it had been considered quite radical and dangerous.

But through all his readings, Edward began to accumulate the feeling that this surface level of activity was not everything, was not even the most important reason for the Grange's existence. There was something unspoken beneath the primary texts of a century ago, half a century ago, even two decades ago, something that popped up only now and then, as if it

were too powerful to keep completely submerged, rearing its massive green head like the crown of an ancient thick-boled oak bursting full-grown and -leafed through the bland surface of the earth.

And the unspoken secret seemed, Edward slowly realized, to revolve around a woman—or women—known as Sally Lunn, and how she was… well, there was no word for it but worshipped.

From a privately printed, anonymously authored book titled *Gleanings and Chaff: An Amateur Agriculturalist's Experiences with the Patrons of Husbandry*, 1879, whose spine was broken and pages flaking:

> Sallie Lunne was present that night, for the first time since I had attended the Grange, and I was told to show all proper respect and deference to this old dame, although how she differed from any farmer's elderly wife I could not immediately apprehend. I was told by the Grange's Thresher that Dame Lunne was not her baptismal name, but an appellation given to the woman who filled the role of Grain Mistress, and that therefore each branch of the Grange boasted its own Mistress Lunne, simultaneously in attendance all across this broad land —nay, even the globe.
>
> Mistress Lunne seemed a taciturn, even dull, sort, and spoke not a word during the Grange meeting itself. But afterward, when I was brought forward to be presented to her, I was forced to revise my hasty first impression.
>
> Her exact words I do not recall, but know with a certainty that they most favorably impressed me with her strength of character and Demeter-like vitality. She seemed a veritable fount and wellspring of pastoral virtues, her high office having caused her to transcend herself, and her touch was correspondingly galvanic. It is hard to overstate her effect on those made of lesser stuff.
>
> Even more difficult of relation is the aspect she dons during certain private Granger rituals. But I can say no more.…

One morning, prior to leaving for the city, Edward took his coffee out to the back porch. Lucy was still in the shower. Edward hadn't told her what he was doing on campus each day; she thought, he believed, that he was working on his book.

His eyes drifted toward their vegetable garden. It was nine days since he had turned the soil with such backbreaking labor, and he hadn't paid much attention to it in the interval.

The tomato plants were spilling over their wire cages, heavy ripe fruit bedecking their leafy sprawl. Peas were ready to pick, as was an abundance of lettuce, eggplants, cucumbers, and zucchini.

Lucy emerged, barefoot, robed, and toweling her hair. "Oh, I'm sorry—Did I scare you?" she asked.

Dabbing ineffectually at his coffe-soaked shirt, Edward said, "Just clumsy, I guess". He set his empty cup and saucer down noisily on the porch rail. Then his eyes caught on what was nailed above the back door.

Lucy followed his gaze. "It's a sprig of touch-leaf", she explained. "Saint John's wort. Aren't all those golden flowers beautiful?"

"Beautiful, yeah, they are. I guess. Why's it there?"

"To guard against thunder, lightning, and fire. There's a spray over the front door, too."

Lucy regarded her husband as if waiting for him to inquire further, or contest what she had said. Edward didn't bite. He was just waiting for what came next. Something had to come next. It was in Lucy's eyes. They were floating in that same opalescent light as on the day the two of them had consecrated the miraculous garden.

"Saint John's Eve is just a few days away, you know. Midsummer Night. It's an important day for the Grange. There'll be a lot going on. Do you think you might come?"

"I—I'll see. Listen, I've got to be going now. A lot of research to finish __"

Lucy kissed him chastely good-bye. "If you call, I might be out. There's a red tide on the coast, and we're helping the local Grange there to deal with it."

"I see," said Edward.

The car radio confirmed that one of the nuisance-making algal blooms had just been spotted that morning. Edward didn't give it a snowball's chance in hell of lasting more than a day.

Edward had run into a dead end investigating the Grange itself. Nowhere were the more arcane practices he suspected them of described in detail. He was forced to turn to anthropological and mythological works, notably

Grave's *The Greek Myths*, Frazer's *Golden Bough*, and Campbell's *World Mythology*.

In the Frazer, he found that the ceremony he and Lucy had participated in was old, old, old, as old as agriculture itself. Fucking in a field, by couple or community, to ensure fertility, was a ritual found from Central America to New Guinea to Central Africa to the Ukraine. Edward could now personally testify to its efficacy.

There were a hundred, a thousand other bizarre and not-so-bizarre practices connected with raising crops. An activity so central to civilization could not have failed to accumulate myriad superstitions over the millennia, contributions from every ethnic and racial group known to history. Druids, Gauls, Bantu, Aztecs, Greeks, Romans, Seminoles, Apache—Edward wallowed in the descriptions till his head reeled. Intercourse with trees, beating recalcitrant crops, supplicating the rain and sun, chastising the moon, sacrificing animals and humans—

Which of these did the Grange practice?

Sacrifice?

Human sacrifice?

Yes, Edward was suddenly convinced. He was the intended victim for the Saint John's Eve festivities. Coinciding with the summer solstice, after which the days began to shorten and vegetation implicitly to die, the archaic holiday was marked with propitiations to distant winter. In Russia, a straw figure was drowned in a stream. The Druids burned their sacrificial king in the Midsummer bonfires. This was why Lucy had been fattening him up, like some hapless Hansel. Oh Lord, what was he going to do?

Almost blinded by tears of fear and disappointment at the treachery of his wife, Edward continued to flip uselessly through the pages of the book before him. A phrase leaped out at him:…*known as soleil lune*.

He backtracked.

> A large, round cake was baked from the summer's first harvest of grain and consecrated to the Sun and the Moon, twin tutelar deities of husbandry, by whose radiant beneficence the crops ripened, and by whose phases propitious times for sowing and reaping were determined. This cake was ritually broken and shared among the community. Known as soleil lune in France, this symbolic body of

Ceres was, due to misunderstanding of the original phrase, called Sally Lunn in England.…

* * * *

The flames soared high. Edward could see them from across the field in the night. A circle of leaping bonfires, they ringed a small wooded hill. The air was thick with their smoke, and with the richness of the Midsummer vegetation.

Lucy handled the jouncing car well on the rutted dirt road. She whistled as she drove. Edward, slumped miserably in his seat, thought he recognized again “John Barleycorn Must Die.”

In the end, he had agreed to accompany Lucy to the Grange’s ceremony. What else could he do? If Lucy wanted to get rid of him, then there was no reason for him to go on living. He had never quite realized what she meant to him until now. Only her apparent abandonment of him as a sacrifice to her new religion had showed Edward the depths of his ties to her. She had been everything that had supported him in his work, his bastion during hard times, his joy during good. If their life together was at an end, he’d at least be loyal to her up to the ultimate moment, for all they had shared, even if she had betrayed him.

The car came to a stop amidst others, the same old models that had been parked outside the Grange hall. The early arrivals, Edward saw, were standing near the fires, lit with gold, partly shadowed.

Lucy levered open her door and stepped nimbly to the sweet-smelling, trodden hay grass. Edward dragged himself out of the car.

“Are you O.K., dear? Are you sure you want to be here tonight?”

Edward nodded dumbly. How could she be so appallingly blithe at his imminent demise?

They walked toward the crowd. Sally Lunn was not visible. The other six elderly officers separated themselves and approached. They were wearing their sashes and nothing else, their old carcasses somehow not pitiful or funny, but immensely dignified and potent. They carried archaic flails and scythes.

“Is your husband ready?” one asked. Edward thought he recognized Roger Swain, The Presbyter.

“Yes.”

“We will escort him. You must remain behind.” Swain took Edward by the elbow. The six officers and Edward began to walk uphill.

Looking up as he ascended, Edward stared full into the beaming face of the moon. Where had it come from? A moment ago it had been nowhere in sight.… He stumbled, and was forced to drop his gaze. When he looked up again, there were only innumerable stars.

By the time he reached the top, he was winded, more from fear than physical exertion. Under the dark trees, away from the flames, he could hardly see. They stopped to let his eyes adjust. Edward thought he saw an open work structure, like a giant wicker beehive. They moved toward it.

The structure was an airy hut woven of willow withes. Sally Lunn sat cross-legged inside it, clothed in a robe. Edward could feel her presence from six feet away.

“Happy Saint John’s Eve, Edward. We’re glad you could make it.”

The other officers had faded respectfully back and left him alone with Sally Lunn.

Edward collapsed nervelessly to the earth. He thought he could hear the gentle purling of a stream or spring nearby.

“Do you know who I am now?”asked Sally Lunn.

Edward shook his head no.

“I think you do. I am the Sun and the Moon and the Earth. I am Ceres and Gaea and Demeter, Persephone and Hecate. I am the force that through the green fuse drives the flower. I am burgeoning and fecundity, blossom and fruit. Do you acknowledge this?

Edward’s lips were very dry. “Yes,” he whispered.

“Do you know why you are here tonight?”

“Not really. But I can guess.”

“It’s because of your wife.”

“I know that much—”

“Quiet. You know nothing. Your wife is a very important person. Look at me. This body I inhabit is one of a few special ones, receptive to me. I come into it only from time to time. I am immortal. But although I can lend it a few years, this body is not immortal. In fact, it will soon go to feed the soil. This chapter of the Grange will be without their Sally Lunn. The important work they do would falter without guidance, But your wife—”

Revelation burst on Edward then, and he dared to get to his feet and interrupt. “You mean to possess her.”

“I already have.”

The officers had drifted back silently during Edward’s audience, and now stood outside the door of the hut. Sally Lunn spoke softly.

“It only remains for you, as Lucy’s husband, to marry me.”

Edwin Landseer, the Plowman, was helping Edward to remove his clothes, while Betty Rhinebeck, the Attendant, was slowly pulling the robe off Sally Lunn’s wrinkled shoulders. The Presbyter was aspersing them both with crisp water, while Alice Cotten, the Thresher, plumped up a bed of fragrant herbs and ferns. As Edward stared, Sally Lunn’s robe pooled about her waist.

She was no longer old. She was young as spring, a nymph with unmottled skin and abundant flesh, supple as a reed. Her hair was as thick as wheat in a field. She looked like Lucy and like every woman he had ever coveted. A heady perfume rose from her loins, indistinguishable from the earth.

Nancy Rook, the Sluicekeeper, was behind Sally Lunn, lowering her backward to the bracken. The goddess dug her heels into the ground and arched her back off the ground so her robe could be removed from underneath her, then finally pulled off her uplifted feet when she settled back down.

Calvin Culver, the Sower, guided Edward between her legs.

It was infinitely more intense than what Edward had experienced with Lucy in the garden. And that had been the headiest sex he had ever had.

He rose to meet the sun.

He answered the moon’s pull.

He tasted the earth.

He was a long, hot root in the soil.

He found the spring, the honeyed well on the hill, and drank deep.

The act felt as immemorially old as the grinding of one stone against another, with the grain being crushed between.

Then he flowered whitely, like an anemone.

When it was over, he lay for a time in Sally Lunn’s arms, eyes closed. He dared not look whether she was young or old again.

“Would you die for me right now, Edward?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“I am pleased to say it won’t be necessary. But someday I might ask again.”

After a quiet interval, he somehow knew he was expected to get up and redon his clothes, so he did. The sashes came to lead him back downhill. He looked over his shoulder once, like Orpheus. The hut was empty.

The fires were dying down, the people dispersing. He found Lucy. Her hair was crazy, and her shirt hung out of her pants.

Driving back home,he was too baffled at being alive to be able to talk.

But in bed, holding the wife he had never known, whom he had so recently remarried, he found his voice and asked, “What I did tonight—it doesn’t bother you?”

Sleepily, Lucy said, “But why should it, dear? She was only me.”

PHYLOGENESIS

Life is tenacious, life is ingenious, life is mutable, life is fecund.

Wildflowers spring from vast fields of pillowy black lava barely cool. Bacteria dwell in pockets of oil squeezed between seams and strata, and they proliferate in anaerobic and glacial niches. Nodding fronds and waving worms cluster around hot mineral springs gushing from the floor of the sea, lightless and under immense pressure. Dead staffs, cut years gone by, planted in good soil, take root and sprout leaves. A subarctic pine thick as a pencil, when examined, reveals seventy annual growth rings. Fish and frogs are immured in mud during years of drought, to reawaken with the first rains. Herman Melville once heard a gnawing sound from within a favorite table and watched an insect bore its way out of the unblemished surface, having gone dormant in the original tree from which the table was made decades ago.

Most hardy, most tenacious of life—if living they can indeed be called—are perhaps the viruses. Classified as obligatory parasites—doomed always to an existence dependent on other organisms—barely more than some nucleic acid in a protein coat, they can lie in wait in animate—smallpox in a blanket—for a passing host. Given merely an instant's contact, they will plant themselves and flourish.

But al1 these examples, however diverse, presuppose at least a minimal planetary environment, a nurturing biosphere. Without that—when a planet dies—can life endure?

This was the vital problem the human race found itself facing.

The invaders came to Earth from space without warning, their skins hardened for atmospheric reentry. In blind fulfillment of their life cycle, they sought biomass for conversion to more of their kind. Earth offered al1 they needed.

Only in the final days of the plague, when the remnants of mankind huddled in a few last redoubts, did anyone admit that extermination of the invaders and reclamation of the planet was impossible. The ecosphere had been fundamentally disrupted, damaged beyond repair.

Then did the chromosartors begin to work feverishly to adapt a new man to the alien conditions. With a snippet from the marsupials, a string from

the *Pinnipedia*, incorporating dozens of other genetic components, they refashioned woman and man for the new conditions.

And their overal1 model, the organism they felt offered the best tactic for survival, was, out of al1 creatures, the most simple.

Virus.

* * * *

The host was sick. Here in its adult environment, without predators its own size, capable of a long, long existence, it had succumbed to infection. In the forbidding vastness of circumsolar space it wallowed, out of control, plainly dying.

Stars hung in the limitless vacuum, pinpoints sharp as loss: orange, blue, white, ruby. One blazed only a few Astronomical Units away, correspondingly more dominant. These luminaries were the only watchers. There was no active mind present to care about what was to occur.

Scale was hard to determine in this wilderness, but the stricken creature seemed to occlude a goodly number of stars with its bulk, in its spasmodic progression through the vacuum.

Ripples pulsed across the organism’s elastic surface, convulsions engendered by unseen internal disquiet. It was plainly a system out of control.

These wavelike motions picked up speed, acquired a crazy tempo, like that of a fibrillating heart. The host looked like an amniotic sac disrupted by the frantic movements of its strangulating inhabitant.

Suddenly, noiselessly, without warning, the host ruptured. Amorphous fragments and thick sheets of biological substances—along with liquids and gases—blew off and scattered in every direction, the solids pinwheeling and tumbling end over end.

Among these useless fragments were several large flocks of objects that seemed still viable. Small ovoids, complete and self-contained, these were the vesicles. Unlike the object that had expelled them, they were born helpless, without control over their course. They radiated off into the depths of space, limning the surface of a ghostly, expanding sphere.

There happened to be no other hosts in the immediate vicinity. The vesicles were thus doomed to wander indefinitely.

The hosts—the prey of the vesicles—although much larger and more capable than the aimlessly floating parasites, were still insignificant targets, compared to the distances that separated the two.

But time was long, and any likely event must come to pass. Eventually, the vesicles would chance to meet a new host.

* * * *

There was movement amid the great lifeless night.

A segment of stars was occluded by a tremendous glaucous bulk moving slowly. Its exterior possessed a quasi-organic texture, like a bluish grey compound of fat and plastic. It had a relatively high albedo, so it was rather bright. Its shape was a featureless ovoid. It resembled nothing so much as a titanic mottled pill-capsule.

In its creeping passage, the host was moving toward something that seemed, at first, a single smaller object with many components. This object was also moving, on a path tangential to the host. As the distance between the two objects narrowed, the latter resolved itself into a flock of discrete entities.

The vesicles' long unconscious seeking was almost at an end. The gravitic memory of their ejection from a common source with identical force and trajectory had kept them together on their uncontrolled flight through the long night, a cluster of small pods that were identical in substance to the host.

Now the foremost portion of the host intersected the flock of vesicles. Some stuck, held not by magnetism or gravity, but by adhesive forces biological in nature. Others—too far away or not tenacious enough—drifted by, losers in the cosmic lottery.

The ones that had clung to the host had a chance to live and reproduce. The ones that had failed to catch on would, in all likelihood, die. Perhaps they would plunge into this system's sun. Perhaps they would simply wither away, their natural capacities exhausted, their dormancy become final death.

The host emerged from the diminished cloud of vesicles. The two units continued on their separate paths. The sleek uniformity of the host's thick skin was now broken by the scattered forms of the clinging vesicles, like limpets on a rock. But there was no reaction from the host to this change in

its condition. It seemed unaware of its doom. No host, in fact, had ever been known to exhibit sentience.

The vesicles, however, sensed the difference in their state, and they emerged from dormancy. Interior cellular mechanisms began to switch on.

Soon, the portion of the vesicles in contact with the host began to secrete a lysis-promoting enzyme. The integument of the host beneath the vesicles began to dissolve. After a short time, the vesicles and the host were immutably fused together. The vesicles continued to eat inward, single-mindedly following a program laid down long ago.

The wounds on the host closed with temporary patches slowly behind the invaders, thwarting the release of the host's interior components into the vacuum of space.

The invasion took place in utter silence, no cries or alarms sounding in the desolation of space, despite the life-or-death nature of the struggle. Success did not lie solely with the invaders. Some defective capsids were stopped by subcutaneous membranes that formed a second line of defense. Their contents were enzymatically absorbed. However, most of the capsids soon penetrated the thick hide of the host completely, gaining access to its interior structure: a labyrinth of cells and arteries, nerves and organs, structural tubules and struts, all lit with exceeding dimness by a yellow-green bioluminescence.

A nonhomogenous environment of wet and dry spaces, some cluttered with pulsing conduits and organs, some home to roving organelles, others like the empty caverns formed in foam.

At the immediate instant of gaining entry to this variegated interior, the vesicles discharged the machinery of subversion, their living blueprints, the carriers of heritage and the template for the formation of more vesicles.

Throughout the interior of the host, falling with liquid plops from the exhausted, dying vesicles, scores of naked neohumans in all stages of maturity landed on their backs and sides and bellies, coughed up pints of fluid, and became instantly aware.

The host had now fully sealed off the holes made by the vesicles, preventing the vacuum from entering, but it was too late to forestal1 the real damage.

* * * *

6-Licorice opened his brown eyes. He wiped his lips and chin clean of the gelatinous fluid that had until this moment filled his lungs. Already the estivation medium was drying on his body, turning into opaque white flakes that would soon fall off like scales. It felt good to be awake once more—to be alive. It seemed only minutes ago that he had entered his capsid, there to dream uneasily of his short but full life—the past and what might come—but he knew he might in reality have been asleep for years.

6-Licorice lay for a second or two, considering how lucky he was to have survived. Such a short moment of reflection was all he could afford, here in this nurturing yet hostile environment. Then he levered himself up agilely off the warm rubbery floor.

6-Licorice was a fully mature adult neohuman, a fine exemplar of his species in the only form in which it existed now. He stood four feet tall, with limbs rather gracile than muscular. He was completely hairless. His eyes were big, the pupils big within them. His genitals were hidden in a pouch of skin. There was a thick crease or fold of flesh across his otherwise flat stomach.

The first thing 6-Licorice had to do was find out if 3-Peach had made it too.

6-Licorice surveyed his surroundings. He was in one of the drier corridors—roughly cylindrical in cross section—which threaded the flesh of the host immediately beneath its tough skin. (All hosts exhibited an almost manufactured uniformity.) The texture of this corridor was fibrous, almost vegetative. The jaundiced light generated by the host's substance—although dimmer than moonlight—was perfectly adequate for 6-Licorice's large eyes. It was in fact the only form of illumination he had ever known.

Sniffing the moist air, 6-Licorice failed to detect 3-Peach's scent/taste. So he moved to one of the walls, where he found by touch a buried vein, which he bit into with sharp teeth.

One of the many nourishing juices the host provided filled his mouth. 6-Licorice drank it gratefully.

After a few swallows, 3-Peach's taste/scent came to him: her saliva, mixing with the host's fluids, where she too drank upstream. (Had 6-Licorice been upstream of3-Peach, she would have responded in the same way to his trace.) It was an unmistakable and unique mix of chemicals,

being bound up into her very genes, and it possessed a special affinity for all those of 6-Licorice's lineage.

A string consisting of three molecules of allyl cyclohexylcaproate; two of allyl phenoxyacetate; five of cinnamaldehyde: 3-Peach-2-Honey-5-Cinnamon—his mate, his love, the complement to the special cargo of chromosomes that was his share of neohumanity's continued perpetuation.

She was here! She had survived!

6-Licorice left the dribbling wound he had made in the host and began to run up the passage, in the direction from which the liquid had flowed to him.

Luck was with him, for he met no macrophages or lymphocytes or other harmful scavengers on the way. This was as expected, a kind of grace period, it being really too early for the host to have mobilized its defenses yet. Immunologically speaking, the host was still in the primary response stage.

In a short time, 3-Peach's scent/taste filled his nostrils. He picked up his pace.

Attracted by his airborne signature, 3-Peach came running around a corner to meet him.

They collided in an ecstatic embrace and fell to the resilient floor.

In a second, instincts rampant, they were mating.

The sex lasted under a minute.

Still, it was intense, tinged with mortality and separation.

3-Peach and 6-Licorice regained their feet as soon as they were done. There could be no post-coital sleep or restful talk for them. Their world was too relentless.

"Oh, 3-Peach, I'm so glad you made it!"

"And me for you, 6-Lick!"

3-Peach fondly patted 6-Licorice's wet detumescing genitals as they withdrew into their pouch. He stroked her flat, nippleless chest in return.

"That was nice," said 3-Peach. "I'm sure it'll be five healthy ones this time."

"Me too," replied 6-Licorice.

Arm in arm, they set off easily, but with an underlying wariness, to meet briefly with others of their kind.

* * * *

Out of the large cluster of vesicles, only a bit over two hundred had managed to make contact with the host, the rest sailing off into the cold, destructive darkness. A small percentage of these vesicles had contained children of varying ages. The rest had harbored adults, like 3Peach and 6-Licorice. And like that couple, the others had quickly mated: with their prior mates, if those individuals had chanced to come aboard the host also, or with new partners whose mates had also failed to be picked up like interplanetary cockleburrs on the back ofthe host.

Thus, within an hour of the invasion of the host, roughly a hundred pregnancies had been successfully started.

With this all-important task out of the way, the neohumans set about establishing themselves firmly in the host.

Basically, this procedure involved scattering themselves throughout the interior of the gargantuan alien. They could not settle down into a single large community at this stage, unless they wished to chance being completely wiped out in a massive attack by the host's defensive entities and its immune responses. The concentration of so much nonhost antigenic protein would have stimulated an immense marshaling of macrophages and lymphocytes by the host, floods of interferon analogues, which the neohumans would have been hard-pressed to survive.

Therefore, the various couples betook themselves to isolated portions of the host, living for a time like independent frontiersmen of another age. They walked through mazed passages crimson as blood, and rode the sticky turbid currents through large arteries. (These neohumans could go without breathing for as long as twenty minutes, thanks to their seal heritage.) They climbed through honeycombs of spongy lipid-yellow wet tissue just as their remote ancestors had climbed through vines and branches. They burrowed through thin cellular walls when necessary, using their teeth and tough nails.

Some died along the way, by drowning or suffocation or ingestion by the patrolling macrophages: roving jellyglobes as big as the neohumans, motivated by chemotaxis, attraction along chemical gradients. If a couple were threatened together, the male would often sacrifice himself, to ensure the escape of the female and her gestating burden.

Eventually, nearly two hundred neohumans were distributed throughout the entire host.

And exactly thirty days to the minute after their entry into the host—the neohumans monitored the passage of time with unerring precision, thanks to long-ago modifications in the suprachiasmatic nuclei of their brains, which provided them with accurate biological clocks—roughly one hundred women gave birth to their litters.

* * * *

"Get ready, 6-Lick—they're coming!"

3-Peach rested in one corner of the red-walled, veined humid cavity she and 6-Licorice called home, her legs wide apart, knees drawn up to her ears and gripped tightly. 6-Licorice squatted patiently in front of her, awaiting the births.

Without visible effort, 3-Peach squeezed out the first of her litter. To the eyes of another era, the infant would have looked premature, almost fetal. And in truth, it could not yet survive on its own.

Which was why 6-Licorice took it tenderly and, pulling open the crease of flesh across his abdomen, inserted it gently inside, where it fastened to a hidden nipple.

He did the same with the other four.

Then he and 3-Peach immediately had sex again, to start another batch, moving less frantically than that first time, cautious of the pouched young ones.

When they were finished, 3-Peach—always more optimistic than her mate—said, "They all looked fine, didn't they, 6-Lick?"

6-Licorice softly pressed his abdomen. He had been worried about mutations—induced by cosmic radiations experienced as their vesicles had traveled through space—as much as she.

"Yes, they did. And I'm sure the next four or five litters will be just as strong."

* * * *

The neohuman population of the host, after the first birthings, now stood at roughly seven hundred, more than double the number of initial invaders. True, there was not much outward show of this leap yet, since the newest neohumans were all still pouch-bound.

However, at the end of the second month, when all the males were waddling about awkwardly, the first litter came forth, independent, self-mobile, able to feed themselves from the body of the host, not talking yet, but on the verge of speech. They vacated the pouches of the males just in time for the next generation to go in.

(6-Licorice, at the end of each cycle, looked more pregnant with his distended abdomen than 3-Peach ever did.)

The second litter safely pouched, the first afoot, a third litter soon occupied all the neohuman wombs.

By the end of six months, the neohuman population of the host stood at three thousand plus. And the oldest children were half as big as their parents.

At the end of one year, there were six thousand members of the community of invaders who had never known a life outside this present host. The original two hundred settlers, through attrition, were down to one hundred and fifty, 3-Peach and 6-Licorice being among them.

Now the oldest children, aged one year and fully adult, began to breed, along with their still fertile parents.

There were four hundred breeding pairs that month. At the end of thirty days, they gave birth to two thousand children.

And the second-oldest generation, a month behind the first, began to breed. Six hundred and fifty pairs gave birth to 3,250 children.

The next month, nine hundred breeders birthed 4,500.

When the next two hundred and fifty pairs came on-line, the result was 5,750 newborns.

And the next month, and the next month, and the next…

By the end of the second year, the neohuman population inside the immense host was nearing one hundred thousand.

And they had barely got going.

* * * *

Eldest by a few seconds of 3-Peach’s and 6-Licorice’s first litter, 2-Honey was now slightly more than a year old, an energetic adult with his mother’s optimistic nature.

The male neohuman’s full designation was 2-Honey4-Licorice-9-Clove. His parents’ signatures had recombined uniquely in him, as they would in

all his siblings.

By these unique families of signatures the neohumans were divided into clans. Clan membership circumscribed mating, the heart giving way—or rather, indulging itself only within certain boundaries—according to an inbuilt determinism. The long-dead chromosartors had limited their progeny in this way for a particular purpose.

Knowing that thenceforth the human race would possess a basically nonmaterial culture, the chromosartors had pondered what faculties, what cargo of knowledge, they could pass on to the neohumans as a legacy of six thousand years of civilization. They had eventually settled on several talents, chief of which was mathematical skill.

The entire corpus of mathematics was literally encoded in, and distributed across, the collective neohuman genome.

2-Honey's clan was the bearer of Riemann integrals. They were born with a predisposition toward solving those abstruse functions in their heads. The circumscribed mating choices insured that the ability would be passed from generation to generation.

2-Honey had taken for his mate a female named/tasted 7-Apple-1-Clove-8-Peach, whom he had met half a host away, while eluding a persistent lymphocyte. Ducking into a fibrous maze too small for the lymphocyte to enter, 2-Honey had stumbled on the home of 7-Apple and her family, distant cousins. It had been love at first scent.

One day shortly after birthing their own first litter, the couple was traveling together to visit 2-Honey's parents. The son and his wife had lately, during a heated session, discovered what they believed to be a new aspect of unbounded Riemann integrals. Now they wanted to confirm with their elders that their discovery was actually original and valid. If such was the case, then the new information would be disseminated as widely as possible among their clan, to insure the survival of this knowledge.

As 2-Honey and 7-Apple loped speedily through the corridors, they fell into speculating on the importance of their discovery.

"If only it's real," said 7-Apple. "It would be such an honor. Why, who knows, it might even lead someday, somehow, to the race returning home, to Earth."

"That's a nice dream, 7-Apple," replied 2-Honey absentmindedly. "Even if it is unlikely. Still, we can always hope…" 2-Honey's voice trailed off.

He was really in no mood to chatter. The long graceful S-curves of integrals occupied his vision, and he was lost in a numinous realm of abstraction.

7-Apple saw the newly grown patch of acid blisters too late, and 2-Honey never saw them at all. She swerved, but he ran right across them.

The blisters exploded, drenching 2-Honey and just spattering 7-Apple.

When 7-Apple opened her eyes, she saw 2-Honey writhing on the floor. Ignoring her own pain, she moved to touch him.

“No—” gritted 2-Honey through clenched teeth. “You’ll burn yourself. Liquid. Wash me—”

2-Honey yowled then, high and long. The sound went right through 7-Apple like a cartilage knife. She ran off, trying to erase the image of 2-Honey’s bare white bones showing through his flesh.

When she returned, quickly as possible, with a sac of cool juice pinched from a cluster, 2-Honey’s legs, the last part of him visible, were just disappearing into the bulk of a macrophage. His appointed fate, delayed since their initial meeting, had at last overtaken him.

7-Apple threw the sac at the macrophage, where it burst uselessly against its peristalsis-heaving form. Then,stifling her grief, sensible that to lose her own life would be to deprive the neohumans of a possibly important discovery, 7-Apple turned and loped on.

She swore every neohuman would come to know of 2-Honey’s bravery and genius. Yes, they would!

2-Honey: from birth to maturity, from nescience to supreme intellectual accomplishment, his life had spanned less than four hundred days.

Mayflies, fast-fading blooms, the little creatures of a short hour. Yet to themselves, their lives still tasted sweet as of old.

* * * *

More neohumans lived than died. Naturally, the burgeoning population had its effect on the host. This proliferation was the process by which its kind reached their untimely deaths. The neohumans lived off its tissues and byproducts, producing waste products of their own. Such a crowd as now existed was literally devouring it from the inside out, and filling it with metabolic poisons.

The host responded desperately with chemical/biological/physical attacks.

Cell-dissolving enzymes dripped from certain walls and formed pools, which the neohumans warily avoided. Patrols of jelly-globes that would ingest men and women on contact increased. (The neohumans were forced to lick each other regularly from head to toe, in a kind of social grooming designed to remove the chemical tags that allowed the macrophages to zero in on them.) Temperatures in certain areas rocketed to fever levels.

But all these measures were simply too late. The neohumans met the host's offensives with cunning and biological resiliency. The macrophages they simply overwhelmed by numbers, tore apart, and devoured. Eat or be eaten was the only law. The destructive enzymes and other long-chain molecules they countered with biological agents of their own, the neohumans' bodies having been engineered in the distant past precisely to meet such challenges. The walls of living quarters were laved with micturants that had responded to the crisis by altering their composition in a useful manner. Some of the attacks the neohumans were able to shut off by subverting some of the many ganglia possessed by the host.

All was not gloom during these days of increased biological warfare, however. The interior of the host was filled with song. It was the only art form left to the artifact-free neohumans, and they exploited it to its utmost. Intricate choral threnodies for an ancient racial loss, plangent dirges interspersed with bright individual notes celebrating present-day survival, vibrated the tissues of the host with alien stirrings. Plainsong and partsong, madrigals and chorales, these were the supreme weapons in the neohumans' armory of spirit.

At the end of the second year, with the neohuman population approaching half a million, the interior of the host began to appear ineluctably ragged and sick. There were structural failures and organic decay, nauseating stinks and food shortages.

The neohumans were not troubled, for they had expected as much.

They began to prepare for departure.

* * * *

6-Licorice and 3-Peach stood at a thick transparent portion in the host's outer skin, once intended to admit sunlight on a bank of dimpled blue swellings, for reasons obscure to them, but obviously plain enough to the host. Now the swellings were dead. But the sunlight entered still.

The host had lost its ability to maneuver against solar gravity, by jetting waste gases and liquids, and had been falling for some time down the invisible gravity well into the Sun. It was also rotating slowly without control. However, its own internal gravity remained constant, keeping the feet of the neohuman couple secured firmly to the wet floor, even when that surface had spun one hundred and eighty degrees.

The rotation brought a new sight into the window: a planet and its satellite. The satellite was immemorially grey and dead, with markings that moved the humans strangely, awaking ancestral emotions. The planet, once green and blue, now resembled a white featureless ball, exactly the texture and composition of the host.

3-Peach and 6-Licorice were silent while the planet remained in view. When it had vanished, 3-Peach said, “Do you think they’ll ever leave, 6-Lick?”

“Who can tell? Who knows why they even came? We can’t even say if they’re natural or artificial. Why do we have weight inside them, for instance? And if they did go, what would they leave behind? Bare rock, no life? No,we can’t count on it, we can’t even dream about it.”

A troop of youngsters surged by, laughing and playing tag. 3-Peach said nothing for a time, until they were gone. Then: “I guess you’re right, 6-Lick. We just have to make the most of the life we have.”

They left the window, holding hands.

* * * *

In the last month of life aboard the host, no females became pregnant, although the couples continued to engage in sex, for reasons of comfort and pleasure. Metabolisms were changing in anticipation of departure.

At last the day arrived. All signs pointed to the imminent collapse of the weakened host.

Each human sought out a macrophage. There were plenty left for everyone, and their viciousness had decreased in these end-days, almost as if they had internalized chemical messages of defeat. These former enemies were now to become the means of escape for the humans.

Approaching the scavengers one on one, the human sallowed themselves to be ingested.

The encounters were far from fatal. A new secretion produced by the humans overrode the macrophages' instructions. In the ultimate subversion, the defensive eaters became protective vesicles, settling down by the thousands to the floor. The humans inside inhaled the altered cytoplasm of the vesicles and gradually lost awareness.

Watching their fellows become encysted by the scores al1 around them, 3-Peach and 6-Lick paused for a moment before allowing the same necessary fate to overtake themselves.

"It was a sweet couple of years, 6-Lick."

"I can't remember better."

"The kids grew up fine."

"The songs were glorious."

"The math was exciting."

"The sex was marvelous."

"As always."

Silence, save for other soft and private goodbyes. Then 6-Licorice spoke.

"You're the only one for me, 3-Peach."

"And you for me, dear. I can't wait til1 we're together again."

6-Licorice, not so sanguine as his mate, made no reply but just squeezed 3-Peach's hand.

They went under then, enlarvaed, cocooned.

Only an hour or two passed, so nicely had the humans timed events.

The host exploded silently, its internal pressure rupturing its damaged skin: the end point of the process begun so many human births ago, with the initial pinholes of entry. It looked like a gigantic seed pod distributing its seeds.

Vesicles were scattered in every direction.

Some embarked on a course straight for the Sun; others seemed destined to impact the Moon or burn up in Earth's atmosphere. Chance dictated the course of each, since they lacked maneuvering capabilities.

3-Peach and 6-Licorice were lost amid the thousands. They had been side by side prior to the explosion. Perhaps they would stay together in their long drift. Perhaps not.

But many would live to breed again.

And again.

And again…

GRAVITONS

June 10

Karla again today attempted to dissuade me from conducting the trial upon myself. I believe her exact words were: “You can’t possibly go through with this insane plan, Alex.”

“I have to,” I said, in what I hoped was an assured and confident tone. If truth be told—and where else might I tell the whole truth, if not in my private journal?—I was feeling a little trepidation myself. But I was determined not to let Karla see it.

“There’s no other way to prove my theory,” I continued rationally.

“What about animals? You’ve completely skipped that stage.”

“The phenomenon I expect to observe would be impossible to measure from outside. It’s a perceptual alternation, and an animal cannot report on what it’s experiencing. No, animals are useless for my purposes.”

Karla grew frustrated at my insistently logical manner, as she so often did. It’s always been a sticking point between us, she claiming I exhibit an unwholesome lack of emotions—“an unnatural gravity,” she once called it—and I countering by accusing her of flightiness, of being unconnected to the solid earth of reality. So different are our basic personalities that I’m surprised we’ve remained lovers for as long as we have.

“Do you realize exactly what you’re risking?” she demanded.

“Yes, I do.”

“And you believe it’s worth it? You really think that if you succeed Zavgorodny will just fold up his tents and slink away?”

“No, he won’t do that,’, I said. “However, if my speculations prove correct, then I’ll have the satisfaction of knowing that I’ve contributed something unique to man’s understanding of the universe.”

Karla regarded me with silent contempt for five seconds or so, before saying, “That’s utter bullshit.”

I was taken aback. “What?”

“You heard me. I said you’re full of crap. The real reason you’re doing this is because you want the thing named after you. Admit it. You can’t stand the thought of your precious new element being forever known as ‘zavgorodium.’ That’s the only thing motivating you. You’re going to risk

your health—maybe even die—just so your name will be attached to a—a lifeless chemical!”

Karla began to cry. I said nothing. I noticed with an irrelevant precision that her first few tears were held in a little pool by surface tension at the corners of her eyes. I always had been observant. It’s simply part of my job.

When she was done, she dabbed at her eyes with her sleeve and said, “Well, tell me. Am I wrong?”

“No,” I said. “You’re not wrong.”

June 11

Thirteen months ago, at the Joint Nuclear Research Institute at Dubna, U.S.S.R.—and simultaneously at the facility which I head, the Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory in California—element number 131 was synthesized.

(In these private notes, I refuse to call it “zavgorodnium,” despite the slight precedence those at Dubna had, and I dare not dub it “chiltonium”—yet. So a simple “element 131” it must remain, for now.)

Element 131, this substance never before seen on earth, proved to be the first member of the predicted “island of stability” in the periodic table: that group of superheavy elements higher than number 103 which proved to have a half-life longer than thirty-five seconds. As of this writing, it is still the only stable SHE to be created.

Element 131 has a half-life of approximately twenty-five days. Given this stability, element 131 lends itself to detailed and extended observation. We have been able to perform more tests and assays and analyses on this new material than on any other synthesized element.

The most curious property of element 131 is an effect akin to piezoelectricity.

In common cases of piezoelectricity, mechanical stress on a crystal produces an electrical charge.

Element 131 exhibits a continual—albeit fluctuating—electrical charge in a rest state. Shielded from obvious forces, without apparent mechanical deformation, element 131 produces a trickle of electricity.

Various theories have been adduced to explain this anomaly.

I am certain that none but mine is correct.

There is only one force which could produce the fluctuating electrical charge. One force which it is impossible to shield against.

That force is gravity.

It is my view that element 131 is extremely sensitive to gravity. Its inherent atomic structure makes it responsive to every passing gravity wave, every mass over a certain theoretical threshold.

I know this to be a fact, as surely as I know anything.

However, there is no way of proving it in the laboratory.

According to the mathematics of my theory, the masses needed to influence the production of electrical current in element 131 are of stellar or planetary proportions.

Obviously, not something one could manipulate in the lab. Current science has no way of producing gravity waves, nor can a sample of the new element be isolated in some imaginary "gravity-free" container and examined for cessation of the effect.

Until a recent inspiration of mine, there appeared to be no way of proving my contention. For all anyone knew, Zavgorodny's idiot theory of "quark oscillation" was as plausible as mine, and the various international committees debating over a name for element 131 had no reason to favor either him or me.

But now I have hit upon a method of fully proving that element 131 does indeed register the presence of gravity.

An associate of mine at a certain biological lab (which, for fear of adverse publicity, must remain nameless until the eventual success of my project, at which time his firm shall share in the glory), has developed a tailored molecular vector-agent which is intended to carry element 131 through my bloodstream and into my eyes, where the vector will bind its cargo to the photopigment rhodopsin in my retinas, hopefully converting them to gravity receptors.

In short, I intend to see gravity.

The half-life of element 131 insures that the effect should be temporary.

The injection is scheduled for tomorrow.

June 12

Karla left early this morning, a Saturday. I saw her off at the airport. She boarded a plane for New York, where she and her troupe of dancers have a series of performances scheduled, next week at Lincoln Center.

“At least promise me you won’t do anything until I get home,” she asked, holding my hands in hers.

“I promise,” I said.

As soon as her plane was in the air, I got into my car and headed for the biolab.

Karla simply doesn’t understand science.

Mark was waiting for me in his office. He is a friend of longstanding—we spent our undergraduate years together—and he was risking his reputation and his position at the firm to help me.

The first thing he said when he saw me was, “Are you sure you want to go through with this, Alex?”

It seemed everyone was more solicitious of my welfare than I was. I had expected this attitude from Karla, but thought that Mark at least would comprehend my motives.

“I wouldn’t have put you through all this just to back out now,” I said.

Then we were in one of the weekend-empty labs and Mark was removing an ampoule from a refrigerator and I was rolling up my sleeve and the inside of my elbow was getting swabbed and the needle point had found my vein, all before I quite realized what was happening.

“My only consolation,” said Mark as he removed the needle and discarded the tip, “is that you won’t die of radioactivity. That small amount of chiltonium you gave me was only as hot as an average tracer injection.”

“Please don’t call it that. Not yet.”

Mark shrugged. “Whatever. Listen, are you sure you’re going to be all right on your own? Don’t you want someone to stay with you?”

“I’ll be fine. I’ve arranged a leave of absence from work, and I’ve got all the food I need for a month—although I don’t really imagine any effect will last that long. I won’t even have to leave the house while my eyes are—different. And if something should come up, I won’t forget your number.”

Mark escorted me from the building, gripping my elbow as if I were handicapped somehow.

“All right. But just be careful.”

“I will,” I said, wondering if this promise meant any more than the one I had just made to Karla.

I got in my car and headed home.

My vision seemed perfect during the drive.

Midnight, and I’m going to sleep. Tired of waiting for a change. I’ve neither felt or seen anything different.

Perhaps the whole experiment will be an anticlimactic waste.

June 13

Woke this morning to patchy vision. It’s as if tenuous veils and no-color clouds drift lazily across my field of sight. Unlike common “floaters,” these patches have amorphous outlines. They are not translucent, nor are they opaque. I have the oddest feeling that there is nothing behind them. They seem more negation than substance. Wherever they materialize, they seem to wipe out the whole universe we take for granted. It’s as if they are holes in the fabric of time and space, revealing utter nothingness behind.

This cannot be the visual analogue of gravity. The adaptive process must be incomplete.

I imagine that something like the following must be happening.

As the molecules of element 131 bind to the rhodopsin in my retina—that miraculous film literally as thin as a razor—the process whereby infalling photons—mundane light—are converted into nerve impulses is interfered with. This results in the disturbing migratory lacunae. At the same time, the molecules of element 131 have not yet been fully integrated into the neural signal-processing system, and so there are no new images to replace visual ones.

Gravity—as any first-year physics student can tell you—is a force mediated by gravitons. My eyes are not yet sensitive to gravitons. This must be the case. Surely this depressing nothingness cannot be an image of such an all-pervasive, noble force as gravity…

June 14

When I opened my eyes this morning, I was completely blind.

I am continuing this journal on cassette.

I took some small consolation in the fact that my blindness was the conventional kind, or at least what I assume conventional blindness is like. An utter blackness unobtainable by the sighted eye even with lids shut in a lightless cavern (for even under those conditions, the phenomenon known as “dark light”—false signals spontaneously generated in the retina—would occur). It seems as though my brain has completely shut down its optic

links, rejecting whatever new signals element 131 is producing, under the influx of gravitons.

I can only hope that the links will be re-established soon.

Later in the day. A new, somewhat reassuring thought occured to me. I recall the simple, yet classic experiments done with inverting lenses.

Subjects were asked to wear glasses with lenses that rotated images 180 degrees, for twenty-four hours a day. Trees seemed to have the crowns downmost, people to be walking on air. After some days of this disorientation, their brains spontaneously accomodated to the imposed inversion, and their vision miraculously became “normal.” When the glasses were later removed, they saw the world upsidedown! After a similar period of adjustment, their eyes finally returned to normalacy.

Perhaps my own brain is undergoing just such a transition period.

June 15

Still blind.

June 16

My hypothesis was correct!

Today, though still technically blind, I have “seen” the sun and the earth and the moon without leaving my chair, and without raising my eyes to the heavens, or lowering them to the ground.

I hardly know where—or how—to begin to describe what I have experienced.

Perhaps in a cool recital of theory may lie sanity.

Consider gravity. A force varying inversly with the square of the distance, mediated by gravitons, particles analagous to the photons which transmit electromagnetic radiations. Completely oblivious to this flux, never thinking of our weight as a function of a stream of particles, we live immersed in a sea of gravitons, a sea replenished from an infinite number of sources.

Some of these sources—by virtue of mass or closeness—are more important and prominent than others. Continuing the sea analogy, they are bigger rivers.

All of us are lashed to the planet beneath us by ropes of gravitons.

Above our heads, the moon whips the oceans with flails of gravitons, raising the tides.

Far away, the Sun, largest single source of gravity in our system, has the earth 1assoed by gravitons, and is swinging it in its clockwork ellipse, along with every other orbital object, from Jupiter down to the smallest pebble.

My eyes can now apprehend some of this. The molecules of chiltonium (I now feel entitled to call element 131 by that name), bonded to my photopigments, are putting out fluctuating signals tied to gravity, which my brain is just learning to interpret.

It is an indescribable sensation.

My sleep was broken this morning by a sense of weightiness, an almost kinesthetic, rather than visual, impression. I lay in bed with my eyes shut, trying to determine what I was experiencing.

First, I sensed an enormous presence directly beneath me. The signals coming in through my optic nerves had a pseudo-visual component. There was no conventional coloration to the object—at least nothing I could put a name to—but my brain tried to represent it, as best it could, as a darker center shading off to lighter edges in all directions. I assume now that this is an image of the dense core of the planet surrounded by the lighter mantle.

The object seemed to pulse, almost as if alive.

It occurred to me then that I was sensing the earth's gravity beneath me, even though I lay on my back and my eyes were closed. In my haste to prove my theories, I had never even considered that if I succeeded I would possess a new sense that worked in 360 degrees—in a complete sphere of perception, in fact. Photons might need the easy path of the iris to register, but gravitons were more determined. Neither flesh nor bone could stop them from impinging on my chiltonium-tinged retina, and I could detect masses behind me as easily as those in front.

Somehow, my attention became distracted from the inage of the earth. We know from infancy how to instinctively focus our vision, but I was having trouble focusing my new sense. Still, I persisted, and was able to discern two objects above me: the moon and sun. Both were roughly circular presences, with dark centers fading outward toward their edges. The moon because of its proxinity, radiated gravitons which seemed inexplicably more vibrant than those from the massive sun, and so formed a "brighter" image. A stunning reversal of visual input.

I lay for a while, savoring my triumph. I got up, visited the toilet, then began making breakfast in a clumsy way, fumbling for the utensils and pans I could not see.

Determined to see what I could accomplish, I embarked on a series of mental gymnastics. I began to flick my attention back and forth between the trio of massive astronomical objects—earth, moon and sun—hoping to gradually becone able to hold all three of then in my mind simultaneously.

Around noontime, it happened.

The moment was like falling over a threshold into miles of empty space. I realized with a start that it was now impossible *not* to let all three impinge on my consciousness. My brain had adapted to the omnidirectional input, and now was able to process all the signals simultaneously.

I felt dizzy and had to sit down, for the three objects moved in relation to one another, the moon performing a slow pavane about the earth, and the earth revolving on its axis and waltzing with the sun.

The vertigo subsided after several hours, and I was able to get up and move about. However, as of this recitation, the nausea has still not ceased entirely.

It’s after midnight now, and I have not been able to fall asleep yet. Closing my eyes does nothing to shut out the influx of gravitons. I now have the bulk of the earth between me and the sun, and their images have fused into one massive entity which weighs on my consiousness more strongly than the two separate ones. The moon is more gentle, but still a presence demanding attention. Although I know that my eyes are not in reality subject to any new forces, somehow I feel that the gravitic pull has increased on them, threatening to suck them from my orbits. I hope that when I get tired enough, I shall be able to fall asleep, just as one does amid noise.

I wonder if tomorrow will bring any new developments.

June 17

The ringing of the phone shattered my uneasy sleep around nine this morning. I had not dropped off until after five, my head aspin from the dance of the masses.

It was Karla, calling from New York.

“Alex? What are you doing home? I just called your office, and they said you were taking a few weeks off. Are you okay?”

I mumbled something I hoped was reasurring. I’m afraid I succeeded only in conveying my confusion. However, I was too preoccupied with the new display which had leaped into my attention the minute I became conscious to really concentrate on what Karla was saying.

I do remember she sounded worried about me. She said something like, “I’m sorry I haven’t called sooner, Alex, but it’s been really hectic here. Rehearsals, publicity events… Listen, I won’t pry into what you’re doing. I trust you to keep the promise you made. But if you need me back there, just say so, and I’ll come.”

“No, no, that’s not necessary.… Karla—what day is it?”

“Why, Thursday the seventeenth.”

“Thank you. Goodbye,” I said, and hung up on her. Only the sixth day since I was injected with chiltonium. It seems like so much longer. The effect should be decreasing daily, as the chiltonium decays to lesser elements.

Instead, the new impressions are stronger than yesterday.

All the while I was listening to Karla, I was “looking” around me.

No longer were yesterday’s three massive celestial objects the only entities I could detect.

I was now sensing the masses of common items all around me, and with more definition than yesterday.

As before, I had them all in my attention simultaneously.

Chairs, tables, doors, walls—even the mass of the house itself—all were discrete objects with distinctive shapes which I could hold in my mind. Could not, in fact, dismiss by any kind of willed act.

And of course, they flooded in from all angles, regardless of the direction I was facing.

I fell into a chair I sensed behind me. I had only gotten a few hours sleep, and my mind felt thick and slow.

Something had been wrong with my math. I had postulated that only astronomical-sized masses, with their significant gravities, would be able to register on the chiltonium. Instead, now I was sensing the tiny—yet nearby—gravities of everyday objects. How could that be?

Everything that has mass has gravity, emits gravitons that strike my altered retinas. The threshold of reaction for the atoms of chiltonium must be simply lower than I calculated.

Or else—this thought occured to me in a flash—the extra sensitivity lay in my brain. The synergy with my body was what I had not anticipated. The process of adaptation that I believed had occured must have continued overnight, at an accelerated pace. My brain, in some sort of feedback loop, was learning to process and filter the signals it was receiving more efficiently, to extract the maximum information from them. It was as if the bandwith of the channel down which the gravitons flowed was steadily increasing.

I held my head, which suddenly hurt. The pain seemed concentrated behind my eyes, as it had just before sleep last night.

Another thought came to me then. Perhaps these images were not real, but simply an artifact of my own disturbed senses. No, that couldn't be, for when I sensed the chair behind me, it had been there. And what did it matter if they were hallucinations? I still had to deal with them. No, I had to accept the visions as accurate representations of gravity.

I tried to gauge the new strength of my gravity-sense. Somehow, not quite knowing how I was doing it, I cast my perceptions outward.

I sensed mountains bulking massively to the east of me, huge shapes that tugged at my attention. At the same time, I was still cognizant of the household items around me. (When you look at a complicated landscape such as a forest, how many distant objects are you holding in your mind simultaneously? A hundred thousand leaves and twigs? A million?) Then my senses seemed deflected upward, off the mountains and into the sky.

The pulsing orbs of the sun and moon were still there, deeper in character somehow, distinctive, as was the Earth beneath me.

But now there were others.

I intuitively recognized Mars and Venus, as being the closest of the new objects in either direction. In some strange fashion, I was deriving such information as closeness and relative mass now from these inner representations.

Beyond Mars hung two titans, Jupiter and Saturn, pouring out their gravitons in ceaseless exuberance, almost alive. I was unable to sense their moons, or anything beyond them.

I don’t know how long I was lost in this spectacle. Clocks were inaccessible to me now, save perhaps by touch. All I know is that I sat entranced for a timeless period, “watching” the majestic gavotte of the planets around the sun, all the while half-conscious of my immediate surroundings.

An insistent knocking at the front door brought me back to myself. I suddenly realized I had neither eaten nor relieved myself since the phone call awakened me earlier. I went somewhat unsteadily to the door, using my new sense to avoid the furniture I would otherwise have tripped on.

“Hello?” Mark called. “Alex, are you in there? Are you okay?”

For the first time I sensed the gravityimage of a person.

Mark~s image was fuzzed by the gravity of the intervening door, but still recognizable. An oddly biomorphic shape, the same unnameable “color” as all the other objects I had so far sensed, he pulsed with an intensity identical to the sun, as if his personal gravity was asserting its kinship with that faraway orb.

“Mark,” I said haltingly, still bemused by his new appearance. “What are you doing here?”

“Just checking up on you. Can I come in?”

Something inside me found the thought of letting this—this alien shape inside my house too repugnant for words. I knew it was Mark, but at the same time I found myself convinced that it was something unhuman.

“No—no, not today, please. Listen, I’m fine. I don’t need anything. You can leave.”

“The experiment, Alex—is it working?”

I laughed rather crazily, I’m afraid. “Oh, yes, it’s working. The results are unambiguous. Element 131 does indeed register gravity. I’m making careful notes of everything.”

“Wonderful. The committee, is sure to christen it after you then.”

Mark’s comments seemed inane, in the light of what I was experiencing. I realized with a start that I hadn’t thought of that formerly all-important motivation for the last couple of days. How foolish it all seemed now…

Mark said goodbye and left.

My bladder felt like bursting, a sensation monentarily more arresting than the display of gravity. I used the toilet, then went to the kitchen, where I hastily ate something.

The image of Mark’s body had made me wonder why I hadn’t sensed my own personal gravity. After a little thought, I aseumed that my brain was somehow filtering out the constant and immediate signals of my own gravitons, just as the constant presence of one’s own nose is eliminated from one’s sight.

Such questions were idle. I had more than enough to occupy my mind.

Returning to the chair that had suddenly become my observation deck to the universe, I dropped into it and cast my mind out, beyond the Earth.

June 19

Haven’t slept for two days now. I can’t fend off the impressions flooding in on me long enough to lose consciousness.

I find I almost don’t want to.

Where can I begin to tell what’s happened in the last two days?

Start with this Earth, perhaps.

My perception of this globe we inhabit is no longer that of a featureless blob. I can now distinguish variations in its mass down to the smaller mountain ranges. Undersea ones are as visible as those on the surface. The topography of this globe—to a certain scale—is now always present in my mind.

Closer to home, I can sense snaller masses for miles around. My house and its contents are a ghostly schematic. Passing people and cars on the street wander in and out of focus. Nearby cities are concentrations of weight.

All of this stimuli might be manageable, in terms of organizing them in my mind, were it not for the simultaneous flood of data from the rest of the universe.

I am swamped with the weight of our cosmos.

I can now perceive every object of sizeable mass in our solar system. Asteroids of a certain size, moons, the very rings around planets. Speaking of planets—I can now confirm that there is indeed a tenth one. Its gravity perturbs my altered vision as surely as it does the orbit of Neptune. I can sense the dark mass swimming at the end of its long, long sun-tether, not quite as far out as the Oort Cloud.

Some of the topography of our own moon is also visible to me.

If this is all a hallucination, it is incredibly detailed and consistent.

My mind no longer stops at the limits of our solar system, however.

For the past forty-eight hours, I have probed and pushed and almost inadvertantly strengthened my new senses, until I can now pick up signals from lightyears away.

They say there are a hundred billion stars in our galaxy alone.

I swear I can sense each one.

Oh, not all are individuals. The signals pile up and interfere constructively and destructively with each other, merging, losing their individuality. Still, I believe that somewhere in the welter of the gravitons flooding in on my retinas and stimulating my brain are representatives of every kind of sun.

Pulsars, white dwarfs, black holes, neutron stars, binary systems, cepheid variables, giants off the main sequence—all are tugging at my perceptions, every minute, fron every direction, below my feet as well as above.

The tugging. The awful pulling—that's what makes this new sense so devastatingly demanding. Vision has never really been characterized—at least to me—by any notion of weight or compulsion, despite the metaphor of being "pulled" by a sight. But this alteration to my eyes has left me with an awful awareness of how we are daily impinged on by gravity.

Of course, objectively speaking, nothing has changed. All my life, this rain of gravity has been pouring down on me, without my taking any notice of it. But now, the ability to "see" it has made me hypersensitive to it.

I feel as if my whole body is being drawn by a team of competing horses in a thousand different directions, as if the universe is attempting to rend me atom from atom. The worst kind of migraine that fades in and out.

I know this is all psychological.

Still, I can't make it go away.

I don't know what to do. One minute, holding my head and fighting back tears of pain, I'm praying that as the chiltonium decays, the effect will disappear. The next minute, headache fading, I'm enraptured by the vision of the universe held together by innumerable skeins of gravitons.

Since there's nothing I can do to rid myself of the talent, I suppose I must utilize it to the fullest.

I will try to see if I can extend my new vision beyond our galaxy.

June 20

No luck yet. I am confident that there are gravitic signals from other galaxies hidden in the mix that I just have not learned yet to separate out. Will keep trying.

Later. Completely exhausted, I managed to drop off for a spell. Woke again to the phone, but couldn't summon up the energy to get out of bed and answer it. Must have been Karla or Mark. I hope they don't come over to interfere. I feel I'm on the verge of a breakthrough.

Suppose I really should eat something.…

June 23

It happened today.

I feel like the monk in that ancient woodout, sticking his head through the earthly sphere and glimpsing the hidden machinery of the cosmos.

I can now see other galaxies as compact smudges of gravity. Am able to make out the groupings and supergroupings that they form, patterns of abstract splendor, forming luminous bubbles in the foamy universe, which is revealed to be more vacancy than substance.

I believe the objects I detect at the extreme edge of my sensitivity are quasars, those dwellers at the edge of the cosmos, sixteen billion lightyears away.

I feel like a juggler, holding aloft the entire revolving universe in my mind.

I forced myself to eat something after the triumph, in order to go on.

There's something more, you see. Something I haven't quite gotten a handle on yet. It appears to be a kind of modulated pulse of gravity, emanating from a distinct direction.

I have to concentrate on this…

June 24

Someone knocking on my door. I told them to go away. Afraid now my powers will disappear before I solve this last mystery…

June 25

Convinced I have the answer to the origin of the modulated pulse.

It's an artifact of intelligence.

Some civilization much further advanced than ours is communicating with its peers elsewhere, employing artificial gravity waves.

This signal is all I concentrate on now.

The more I study it, the more I seem to—understand it. I appear to be apprehending it on some cellular level.

What the message is, I cannot put into words.

But my headaches are gone.

June 26

Immense biological changes going on within me. The signal is promoting them, I'm certain. Wish I could see a mirror. Haven't eaten or had anything to drink in three days, but feel fine. Delusion of a dying man? Can't be sure of anything anymore.

June 27

Couldn't move now if I wished to. Luckily, recorder is by the bed, and voice-activated.

June 28

No diminishment in my perceptual powers, although the chiltonium should be exhausted by now. Understand the signal completely, but cannot put it into human speech.

June 29

The people behind the signal are talking to me down the line of gravitons, calling me to them. They're incredibly ancient, yet we're somehow related, as I know from their ability to subvert my biological programming. Their motives are incomprehensible, neither good nor evil. Above all that. Felt an overwhelming urge to heed their invitation. How could I go back to my old life anyway?

June 30

Won~t be able to talk much longer. Have decided to take their invitation, and fall down the well of stars. These people are masters of the universal attractive force. They assure me that my new body—with its altered integument and organs—will respond to their pull, and be able to survive the trip. Goodbye Mark. Karla, goodbye.

Gravity calls.

REDSKINS OF THE BADLANDS

1.

The Skin She’s Into

Now Ruy Lambeth had to shed his skin. Painless and quick, the monthly practice was mandated by his employer, UNESCO, for two reasons.

The skin, a ruggedized Nuvaderm-Allheal Utility model which remained the property of UNESCO, had to be regularly upgraded, downloaded and generally tweaked back at the Fraunhofer-Chesson factory in Durham. A complete turnaround took five business days, including FedEx overnight transit time each way.

But scheduled maintenance was not the total story. Going skinless for that short stint every month—reasserting his baseline humanity—was deemed necessary to stop Ruy from deserting civilization.

Such was the understated but generally acknowledged important second reason for molting.

Too many skinned individuals had gone dingo, vanishing into the remaining wilderness spaces: the jungles or deserts, mountains or forests or oceans of the world. The practice was called “simaking.”

Such desertion generally constituted grand theft at the very least, with the traitorous and selfish individual absconding with a piece of corporate a-life worth tens of thousands of dollars. And while there were no laws against an individual choosing to abandon civilization and all its duties, the authorities invested in the maintenance of same could not allow the bad example set by such selfish slackers to go viral.

And so Ruy Lambeth made ready to unzip.

The manufactured skin that covered him seamlessly from neck to wrists to ankles sported, with astonishing realism, the buff-and-fawn maculated pattern of giraffe hide. An exceptionally tall and skinny fellow, with long neck and prominent Adam’s apple that had been the bane of his high-school dating years, Ruy amused himself by programming the skin’s densely arrayed chromatophores to display such a self-mocking design. Threaded with epidermal electronics, the skin and its many living components communicated with its owner via a fine-meshed silver hairnet supporting

pinpoint transcranial magnetic induction übertoothed into the skin's squishy wireless card. Ruy's thinking cap.

Now Ruy mentally transmitted the signal to shed.

A row of sartorized fibroblasts down the dorsal and ventral midline of the skin went into uptake mode and began unstitching intercellular glycoproteins along a defined boundary. Beginning at the neck, the skin split in a clean dry wound down front and back. At the same time, the skin began to retract its slim extensions from inside Ruy's anus, producing a mildly intrusive yet not wholly unpleasant sensation.

After half a minute, the skin had separated into two symmetrical segments, but remained pasted to Ruy's own flesh. Now he silently ordered the organism—possessed of as much processing power as a couple of old-fashioned servers, but no real turingosity—to take offline its sensory and metabolic interfaces, millions of microvilli lining the skin's inner surface.

That procedure accomplished, the skin was ready to be rolled off like two halves of the bilaterally cut wetsuit it resembled, although it was thinner than the standard neoprene swimwear. Moving nimbly, but nonetheless resembling a drunken crane performing ballet, Ruy accomplished the last part of the task with practiced ease.

Ruy stood naked, the shed artificial integument on the floor. It pulsed slightly with residual peristaltics.

Although he had been wearing the Nuvaderm skin for weeks in the field, his own skin showed normal hairiness, moisture, tone and color, healthy and unmarred by its seclusion from direct contact with the environment. None of the slime or pastiness obtained that an untutored newbie might have imagined. When worn, Ruy's second skin had maintained his baseline epidermis in as fine a condition as that of any hearty, sun-kissed nudist. Finer, in fact, since it also ate any incipient melanomas and farmed a perfect microbiome.

Ruy bent to the smartcarpeted floor of his Toronto apartment and gently retrieved each half of his skin, placing them into a pre-addressed homeostatic mailing capsule that sealed with a hiss of activation. Then he dressed in casual summer-weight clothes and hurried downstairs. He entrusted the capsule to the concierge. The five days without his skin would hardly pass fast enough.

Outside on King Street West, Ruy felt strangely naked and unprotected, limited in his sensory abilities. The sensation of mild October breezes on his bare arms—a balmy twenty-two Celsius Greenhouse degrees today—was not precisely identical to what he would have felt wearing the Nuvaderm integument. His second skin mediated the environment with hi-res accuracy, but featured what Ruy thought of as an ineffably different "flavor" from his baseline perceptions. Over time, that strange-flavor sensory input came to feel like the norm.

Oh, well, this vague unease and avidity just confirmed the wisdom of UNESCO's shedding policy.

Ruy picked up his pace. If he were speedy, he could just manage to have his hair styled in time for his date tonight. Three weeks in the Alberta Badlands had left it looking like a hayrick.

He reached up to smooth the unruly crop, and found himself still wearing his thinking cap. He snatched it off and compressed its few ounces to a small mass and pocketed it.

Dazzle, the gamin stylist at Redd Hair Studio, did her usual stupendous job, making even the gangling Ruy look somewhat dapper. Back home he showered (although having just deskinned he was clean as a kitten), dressed in nicer evening clothes, and was just chilling a bottle of Picpoul de Pinet when the concierge announced Maritza Manzur.

Ruy hastened to his apartment door and opened it just as his stylish girlfriend stepped off the elevator.

With a face from some luminous Old Master Flemish painting, Maritza was a Polish-born high-fashion model. Tweaked in the womb, she sported impeccably curved legs fully ten percent longer than the baseline proportions would have predicted for her six feet and two inches of height. Her waist-to-hip ratio was a perfect 0.7. Her proudly unsupported breasts cantilevered out in seeming defiance of gravity. Ringleted honeyed hair exuded musk from onboard cervoid glands under her scalp.

Ruy had met Maritza at the Wieliczka Salt Mines in her native land. UNESCO had been throwing a gala rededication party for that particular World Heritage Site after the repair of some earthquake damage, and as a top WH field agent, Ruy had been invited. (At the time he had been stationed in Europe.) The unlikely pair had first gravitated toward each other as the tallest people at the party. Then, lubricated by excessive

amounts of Reykjavik champagne, they found they had much in common. A sloppy and spontaneous makeout session down in the dry bowels of the mine, behind vintage steampunkish machinery, sealed their relationship.

Unfortunately, Maritza's job had her globe-hopping as much as Ruy's did, and they seldom had time to be together.

But that only made occasions like tonight's all the more piquant and stimulating.

With the same wide smile that had graced a billion iPads, Maritza cantered on her stilty legs to embrace Ruy.

"Oh, my brave frontier cowboy! How good to enfold you in my lissome arms once more!"

Ruy responded with enthusiasm. Maritza ran her hands up and down his back. Ruy sensed some slight hesitancy or confusion in her stirring feminine touch. But whatever it might have been, she quickly recovered.

After drinks at home, they went out on the town for dinner and clubbing. The freezepop band at the MOD Club was positively *glacial*. One AM found them back at Ruy's.

Snogging on the couch, Ruy put his hand up Maritza's dress, and she did likewise through his shirt front.

"Oh, my dear," she whispered, "where is your precious darling skin?"

"You're touching it."

"Silly boy! You know full well what I mean."

"The Nuvaderm? It's out at the cleaner's."

Maritza drew back. "You are teasing me now."

Ruy experienced his lubricity battling with confusion, and losing. "No, I'm not. But why's it matter?"

"You must recall our last delicious lovemaking. It was epochal!"

Ruy blushed. Despite certain trepidations he had been convinced by Maritza to have sex while wearing the synthetic skin. He had not unseamed the responsive material at the crotch either. The results had indeed been mindblowing, but scary, and Ruy had swiftly put the incident from his memory after resolving never to indulge in such an off-label practice again.

"I'm sorry, Maritza. That was a one-time event."

"A one-time event! That cannot be so. It is all I have thought about since it happened. At least when I was not working. The catwalk takes everything

from me, as you well know. My orgasms were so powerful! We must do it again! Now!”

Ruy began to feel offended. “We can’t. It’s just not possible. We’ll have to interact like normal human beings.”

Maritza stood haughtily, and smoothed her designer clothing. “Normal human beings! Look at me! Chanel harvests my urine as the base for a best-selling perfume! I have not been normal since conception! And you are not either. That is, you cannot be if you want me!”

The door failed to bang behind Maritza only due to its intelligent hardware.

Ruy took a long cold shower, then lay abed for a contemplative interval.

Yes, shedding one’s skin was essential. But not without consequences.

2.

Trouble at the Carbon Spires

A few days after his unsatisfying and terminal reunion with Maritza, Ruy sat in the Ottawa office of his boss, Bagger Wanganeen. He wore the restored Nuvaderm, patterned like a cloth business suit, fake seams and buttons, and his thinking cap. His feet were shod with non-living but ultrasmart Vibram++ FiveFingers shoes.

Bagger Wanganeen was a portly, dour-faced, pock-skinned Aboriginal chap from Australia. Although a competent bureaucrat, he would never ordinarily have ascended to the lofty position of Chairperson of UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee except for the sympathy factor. His native Australia had lost more of its World Heritage sites—thanks to climate change—than any other nation. Fifty percent. Out of twenty designated landmarks, only ten remained. The Great Barrier Reef had died. The coastal sites had drowned. Several rainforests had shrunken to raincopses. And UltraKiwi terrorists had blown up the Sydney Opera House.

But despite a certain mediocrity of talent, Bagger had risen to the demands of the job, becoming in office a dedicated servant to the world’s remaining cultural and natural treasures. His sterling service had secured his reelection time and again.

Now he actually essayed a small smile as he regarded Ruy. “You look rocketing, Lambeth! Like some kind of superhero. Captain Axolotl! How I

admire you field blokes. If only I had the physique and temperament, I'd be out from behind this desk in a bloody minute!"

"Yes, sir, I'm certain of it."

"Tell me, how do you like the upgrades on your skin?"

Ruy sent a mental command to activate the eyes in his skin's shoulderblades. Not fully formed mammalian eyes of course, but squelchy charge-coupled detectors with gigapixel resolution. His thinking cap fed the telemetry directly to his brain, where it was translated as a popup window in his forward field of vision. When he focused his gaze properly, Ruy could plainly see the door and wall behind him, including the old school institutionally sponsored artwork by Jim Woodring.

"It takes a little getting used to…"

"I'm sure it will be immensely handy! And what of the nematocyst defense system?"

"I saw it demonstrated, but I've hardly dared activate it myself!"

"But always good to know it's there, right? You might find you need it soon."

"And why is that precisely?"

"There are some trespassers at your site, Ruy. Possible badmen. We just learned of their presence, although we can't say for certain how long they might have been in the territory. They've lofted a covey of Kilobot micro-aerostats that cloak them from satellite imaging."

"So we're not talking about some tourists straying off the marked trails then?"

"No, definitely not. In fact, our best guess is that your new cobbers are skinned outlaws who seem to have taken up residence at your park. They're dwelling among the Spires. And, more to the point, we believe they are damaging them! I think they're taggers!"

Ruy Lambeth currently served as warden of the Dinosaur Provincial Park in Alberta, part of the extensive Canadian Badlands. Home to large concentrations of fossils, myriad flourishing biotopes, and vast stretches of surreal rock formations, the whole area was jointly managed by the Canadians and UNESCO. Ruy had been head warden and docent for two years now, and loved the land of mixed starkness and abundance with fierce devotion.

Ruy's remit extended to the territory surrounding the park proper. The Badlands had become a carbon depository, one of many such emplaced around the sweltering planet, as humanity sought to deplete the atmosphere of the very carbon dioxide it had so disastrously pumped into it.

A species of synthicrobe had been tailored to metabolically pull CO^2 from the air and sequester it as calcium carbonate—essentially, limestone. These synthicrobes had a tropism for sunlight, meaning that they always migrated to the top of their stony excretions. Thus, the active face of their deposits, where new calcium carbonate continued to accumulate was always atop the pile. This simple task constituted almost the sole behavior of the synthicrobes. But they manifested one other engineered behavior. They reacted spatially to the presence of their neighboring peers in emergent ways. Clustering along strange fractal gradients like cellular automata, the bugs deposited their mineral poop in intricate branching traceries and buttresses, towers and excresences. The resulting land reefs resembled fairyland castles and cathedrals, surrealist skyscrapers and mesas.

And in fact, after twenty-some years of activity, the busy and productive synthicrobes had succeeded in amassing skyscraper-sized agglomerations, many weighing at least as much as the legendary World Trade Center towers: roughly 500,000 tonnes apiece.

Initially seen as the best of a bad bargain, a necessary desecration of the natural Badlands landscape, the ghostly, lacey Carbon Spires had come to be admired and venerated for their utility and alien beauty. Although not officially a World Heritage site, they hovered on the tipping point of becoming one, and so received UNESCO's collateral attentions.

And now, it seemed, a pack of rogue humans were intent on molesting them.

"We can't have this," Ruy said vehemently. "I've got to round these intruders up and get them out of the park."

"Precisely why we equipped your skin with those handy barbs. If they don't come peacefully, they'll come unconsciously. But we intend to give you one more tool before you go. Have you heard of the new Proty drones?"

"No, not at all."

"Well, there's one waiting for you in Calgary, at the University labs. We esteem you so highly that we're having you be among the first wardens to

fieldtest it. The stop's right on your way to Dinosaur Park. You can pick up your trundlebug at the University Zipcar lot."

Ruy thanked Wanganeen, received a handshake and wishes of "Half your luck!", and soon found himself on an Air Canada flight headed west.

Dr. Wally Grigori headed the Synthetic Biology Department at UCalgary. With shaven head and an almost alarmingly robust physique, in the manner of many technophilic self-improvement buffs these days, he had plainly benefited from developments in his own field, since he sported a flesh-tinted slug affixed at the nape of his neck. Dubbed "puppetmasters" by comedians and cynics, the slug served as an auxiliary cerebral lobe, an outboard neuronal mass synced with the wearer's baseline brain. Adopted mainly by Type A business elites, scientists, criminals and gamers.

Ruy had colored his Nuvaderm to a staid park service green. But for all of Dr. Grigori's abstracted indifference, he might have been wearing a patchwork of plaid and checks. Conducting Ruy through the bustling, grad-student-filled facilities, Dr. Grigori maintained a fragmentary sotto voce conversation with himself—or perhaps with that portion of his augmented mentation resident in the slug—interrupting himself at odd intervals to address Ruy.

"(…mitochondrial processing enhancements could do thr trick….run the sim from the fifth iteration… Done!) And there, Mr. Lambeth, you see our splicing room. (Can't forget Laura's birthday again…)"

Eventually they arrived at a room that resembled a canine kennel. Strewn across the floor were several beanbag cushions. Each had a water bowl beside it, but only one cushion held an occupant. At least Ruy thought the mass in the depressed center of the cushion was alive. At the moment, it looked like nothing so much as about a kilogram or three of fatty scourings from the wastebins at an antique liposuction procedure.

Dr. Grigor was beaming. "Meet Proty, Ruy, our latest model drone. (Grant application due Friday!)"

The featureless lump of synthetic cells must have been able to hear somehow, for it stirred at its name. With remarkable rapidity it morphed, assuming the perfect semblance of a chubby starfish, and maneuvered itself off its nest. As it crossed the tile floor, it assumed the protective coloration of the tiles, effectively going invisible. It reached Dr. Grigori, climbed atop

his shoe, and began mildly humping the Dr.’s foot in snake-swallowing-its-prey fashion with what could only be interpreted as sincere affection.

Ruy felt a certain clinical interest in the drone, but also a marked amount of disinclination to become overly familiar with such a thing. Dr. Grigori plainly sensed this reluctance.

“You needn’t worry that it’s going to molest you. This is just a bit of imprinting I established. (Number of journal cites down this month—must ramp up!) Aside from a kernel of core behaviors, Proty is completely programmable. What operating system is your thinking cap running?”

“TigerBright six-point-one.”

“Fine, fine, let me change Proty over to your standard. He’s running Linux now.”

Dr. Grigor squinched his eyes, muttered something incomprehensible, then reached up and detached his slug. He slapped the slug against the drone and downloaded new instructions, then rejoined the organic augment to his neck.

A window popped up in Ruy’s gaze, just as when he was using his suit’s eyes. It showed himself and the Dr. from a floor-level perspective: the visual feed from Proty.

“Just think. You send Proty far afield and get useful audio-video telemetry. But it does so much more. Proty is practically a pocket lab—able to synthesize almost any protein string. He exhibits pseudo-flight—gliding really, after launching from a height. Swimming. Defensive and offensive capabilities. It’s a first-aid resource too. It will pinch off a piece of itself to act as a smart bandage. (Can I possibly get to the ESF-EMBO Symposium this year?) Though of course with that sophisticated Nuvaderm you’re wearing, you probably won’t ever really need such a crude fix. And it’s wonderful company for a lone field agent such as yourself. Proty, show how you can whistle.”

Proty formed a blowhole with complicated labial fluting and an antipodal air-intake port, and began to whistle “You Are My Sunshine.”

Ruy laughed hard. He bent over and picked up the dry, smooth starfish, which quickly assumed a caterpillar shape that fit perfectly in the crook of his arm, simultaneously matching his skin’s green color.

Just like father and child.

3.

On the Trail

Peugeot had designed the first trundlebugs over half a century ago, the Ozone model. Picture a large rolling drum fashioned of electrochromic biopoly, featuring slight catenaries in the lines of its body from end to end. A barrel-shaped compartment suspended between two enormous wheels large as the cabin itself. Solid-state battery packs channeled power to separate electric motors. A curving door spanned the entire width of the vehicle, sliding upward.

Inside, three seats in a row, the center one commanding the failsafe manual controls. Storage behind the seats. Ruy now occupied the center station of the rapidly moving vehicle, while Proty sat beside him, on his left, shaped for the nonce rather like a less-well-defined version of the iconic Pillsbury Doughboy Although the drone occasionally emitted a silent yeasty fart, Ruy felt glad of its company. In just the past 24 hours, he had grown fond of the responsive a-life critter.

After passing through the tiny town of Patricia, while the trundlebug raced down the weather-tortured surface of lonely Route 130 toward the park, Ruy contemplated how he was to go about accomplishing his mission to rid the park of taggers. The task seemed straightforward enough: diplomacy, followed if necessary by threats, followed if called-for by some degree of non-lethal force. Maybe he could enlist provincial backup—maybe not. It all depended on the Mounties' workload. But Ruy was experienced enough to know that nothing ever went easy or to plan.

By noon Ruy was pulling into the parking lot near the Visitor's Center. He checked in with the staff, who offered him warm welcomes, but could tender no additional information on the trespassers. Unlike Ruy, the part-time spit-and-polish rangers never ventured far into the vast interior of the Badlands, and remote surveillance was still interdicted by the intruders' swarm of Kilobots. No tourists had brought reports back either.

Returning to the trundlebug, Ruy retrieved Proty and pulled out packs of supplies from the storage area of the vehicle. Last to emerge was an item that resembled a suitcase composed of complexly interlocking hinged metal struts surrounding some central engine. Ruy unlatched a catch and tossed

the suitcase into the air. It unfolded in mid-arc and when it landed, fully activated, revealed itself to be a Boston Dynamics Big Dog VII packbot.

Ruy secured his supplies to the packbot—just water and MRE's really—set Proty atop the mule, and off they marched to the northeast, Big Dog's slick piston action a symphony of muted syncopated chuffings. Ruy's Nuvaderm automatically adopted a flecktarn camouflage pattern closest to the environment. The refresh rate on mottling was every five seconds, though Ruy could alter that parameter.

The Carbon Spires were half a day's hike distant, meaning Ruy would not reach them before sunset. Not optimal, but what could he do? Rather than fret, he relished the chance to stretch his limbs and reintegrate his mind with the natural beauty of Dinosaur Park.

When Ruy and company reached the closest natural rock formations, impossibly balanced and ornate masses of striated stone, tawny, umber and slate, Proty began to whistle the "On the Trail" portion of Ferde Grofé's *Grand Canyon Suite*, causing Ruy to laugh heartily. Had Dr. Grigori programmed this behavior to spring up at a certain visual cue, or was Proty performing some kind of more intelligent pattern-matching and response? Whatever the cause, the companionship was a nice feature.

Stopping for a mid-afternoon meal, Ruy felt fully at ease. How different from harried and burdensome life in the city! His second skin kept him comfortable and full of energy, subtly massaging his muscles with waves of microtwitches. No unnatural noises disturbed. The temperate breezes registered like gentle caresses. Rich smells were a symphony.

He did not derive any direct solar-generated sustenance from the Nuvaderm—that option was one token of the dingos—and so an MRE and lots of water went down heartily. Proty took some water through an extruded a-flesh siphon, but seemed otherwise content with sunlight. Big Dog ran on a CNSA-derived radioisotope thermoelectric generator.

After just twenty minutes of meditative inactivity, Ruy got underway again, trekking expertly across the challenging terrain.

The sun was nigh to setting when he came within sight of the first Carbon Spires. Initially, Ruy thought the lofty structures were being tinted by the slanting solar rays. But then he realized the truth. Vast portions of the Spires had been painted, in a mad swirl of abstract shapes and color fields, the purity of their untinted calcium carbonate ruined.

Ruy experienced anger, and picked up his pace. But soon caution prevailed. No sense in bulling ahead uninformed. He decided to deploy Proty as his scout. He sent his commands to the drone through his thinking cap. Within seconds, the mass of synthetic protoplasm had reshaped itself to a close approximation of a road runner. Proty took off in a flash.

Ruy put the Big Dog to sleep, aware that its chuffing would alert the intruders. He set off after Proty, keeping the drone's telemetry in one corner of his eye.

As darkness descended, Ruy's Nuvaderm allowed him to see in the infrared. Sensors derived from viperine facial pits banded his chest. Their spectrum-shifted feed came to him through the thinking cap and replaced his baseline vision. Proty's telemetry reflected the same capabilities.

And now the drone was racing through a canyon that seemed to terminate in a hotspot rendered as a whiteout curtain. Ruy realized that the blotch must represent a big heat source: an open fire, presumably a campfire. The encampment of the taggers? He ordered Proty to switch to normal-spectrum vision. Sure enough, the canyon walls were now lit by flickering firelight. Ruy sent Proty into stealth mode and the drone morphed out of avian form to that of slithering pancake plastered against the rock walls.

Reaching the embouchure of the canyon, Proty halted and slyly extruded an eye on a stalk.

Ruy saw four human figures, seated and reclining comfortably on the stone surfaces, relaxed, all in their Nuvaderm skins, all colored a dark, dark red, darker than vermilion or cinnabar or maroon. Proty's audio telemetry brought their chatter and laughter to Ruy, though he was over a mile distant.

Just as he was beginning to make sense of the taggers' conversation, Ruy felt the sharp tip of some instrument poked forcefully into his back. He activated his rearward eyes: a grinning unknown fellow stood close by, arm angled to jab. The man's Nuvaderm skin included a hood feature that framed his face in a snug oval.

Despite the ruggedized spidersilk strength afforded by Ruy's own Nuvaderm, the artificial skin was not impenetrable, and Ruy had no wish to test its protection against what might possibly be a ceramic-diamond blade capable of effortlessly slicing a titanium bicycle chassis in half. Could he fire a barb into the fellow before the man could react—?

As if divining Ruy's thoughts, the man snatched Ruy's thinking cap off, depriving him of contact with both his skin and with Proty.

The man said, "How about joining the party, friend?"

"Is it okay," Ruy asked, "if I bring my Big Dog?"

4.

The CO^2 Bombers of Dinosaur Park

The taggers called themselves the Vitrine Slykes, after a type of invisible creature from a popular children's fantasy, reputed to live in the interstices between doubleglazed windows. The allusion was boastful testament to their own off-the-grid lifestyle, free from consumerism or taxes, social media or jobs. How did they survive in the wild? Quite well.

In addition to protection from the elements and a certain degree of medical care, they received nourishment from their skins, darkened to maximize photon capture and thus photosynthesis, but without falling into utter unfashionable blackness. (Neo-Goth was so *mid-century*!) Disdaining more radical and permanent midriff connections, they had opted for a thin nasal-drip tube running from the edge of each hood into the wearer's nostril, sending a steady stream of fortified glucose stomachward. Hardly a gourmet diet, but completely adequate for health.

Five Vitrine Slykes there were, all as congenial and amused with each other, joking in tribal idiolect, as a nest of otter kits. Their nominal leader, the man who had captured Ruy after spotting him with the aid of the Kilobot swarm, was Paleo Pecos Pete. The two women were named Rachel Fortinbras and Koren Lovat. The two men, Patton Mantooth and Rick Bordeaux. Who might have been sexually affiliated with whom was not immediately apparent to Ruy in the first twelve hours of his captivity.

After Paleo Pecos Pete had secured Ruy's wrists with a self-tightening living liana that he had removed from around his own waist, and hobbled Ruy's ankles, they had gone to retrieve the Big Dog. From there, they had joined the rest of the Vitrine Slykes at the campfire. Cursory but not unfriendly introductions had been made. The Slykes then plundered Ruy's MRE's and water, enjoying a rare feast. Then Pecos Pete laid down the terms of Ruy's imprisonment.

“We’re just passing through these parts, hombre, no need for us to tangle more than we have. You’ll keep us company for a few more days. Then when we’re ready to go, we’ll turn you loose.”

Ruy was indignant at this cavalier attitude. “You’ve defaced a natural wonder, and you’re going to have to pay somehow. A fine at least, probably some community service cleaning it up. Maybe even jail time.”

The Slykes laughed in his face.

“Natural wonder!” said Rachel Fortinbras. The very lineaments of the big chunky gal’s frame, revealed by her form-fitting skin, expressed contempt, her wide mouth jeering. “The Spires are a manmade monument to the folly of our species. We just decided that we should highlight them in a way that brought that fact to the public’s attention.”

“Yeah, yeah!” said Rick with what seemed a constitutional childishness. “We’re gonna bomb the shit outta ’em tomorrow! You can help!”

“I will not take part in this sacrilege.”

Patton, his classic Native American features solemn, said, “Be that as it may. You’re in no position to interfere, and you’ll do as Pete says.”

Ruy had to agree silently that he was helpless. True, Proty remained free and a wild card. But without communication of orders from Ruy, how could the drone help? It had probably gone into default sleep mode.

“Besides,” said Koren, “painting the spires is not even our main task. It’s just something to do while we wait for Project Cadmus—”

“That’s enough of that,” interrupted Pete. “Let’s keep our ultimate scheme a surprise for the nice ranger. What say you, pards?”

The Slykes agreed that their ultimate goals deserved to be hidden for a while.

“Let’s get to sleep now,” advised Pete. “Busy day tomorrow.”

Resigned to his captivity for the moment, Ruy found a fairly flat slab and reclined. Bound at wrists and ankles, he had a limited range of positions, and his mind was racing. But the big sky full of stars was soothing, and, cossetted by the autonomic actions of his Nuvaderm, he eventually dropped off.

The Badlands dawn arrived with typical grandeur, its polychromatic panoply rousing the sleepers. The Slykes had no need for morning ablutions nor breakfast, their skins handling everything. Ruy, however, was starving and needed something to eat. He cadged one of his own MRE’s from his

keepers and downed it greedily. Then he was able to take in the Carbon Spires.

The Slykes had established their camp at the edge of a large irregular stony plain tufted with hardy grasses. From this arena rose the Gaudíesque synthicrobe skyscrapers, silently and imperceptibly growing even as Ruy eyed them. The tops of several of the constructions had been daubed with what seemed random slashes of hideous day-glo colors, lending the majestic spires the look of cheap plastic toys.

Paleo Pecos Pete regarded the handiwork of the CO^2 bombers with evident satisfaction. “Sweet. I figure we’ll stop after today’s stint, and go see how Cadmus is doing. No sense gilding the lily.”

Ruy bit his tongue to keep from calling Pete a barbarian and a dozen other less flattering names.

Pete turned to Ruy. “Rachel’s going to be your warden, warden. She took a bit of a fall the other day and is still aching a bit too much for another climb.”

The hefty woman, who likely outweighed Ruy, grinned at her prisoner. “But not hurting enough so’s I can’t still whomp your ass if I have to.”

“Noted,” said Ruy.

“Okay,” Pete said, “let’s go fill our tanks.”

The four Slykes trooped off, leaving Ruy with Rachel.

“I’m going to sit down if it’s okay with you.”

“Knock yourself out.”

Ruy remained silent for a while, hoping Rachel might get bored and talk. But she seemed content to exist in the meditative moment, a natural enough propensity for a be-skinned wilderness-dwelling dingo. Finally Ruy asked what he hoped was a neutral question.

“How’d Paleo Pecos Pete get his name?”

Rachel grinned again. Despite his anger, Ruy found himself involuntarily admiring the alluring charm of her broad smile.

“Pete was a geo-sci professor at New Mexico State U. Had a thing for fossils, all sorts of wild theories. He thought he could prove one of his crazy ideas with a little dig.”

“So?”

“He decided to do it on public lands at night. Pecos National Park. He got caught, convicted and terminated from the university. Stole a skin from the

labs while he was awaiting sentencing and went dingo.”

Oh, what a bad actor! Ruy grew even more dogmatic about bringing this crew in for justice.

“How did the rest of you hook up with him?”

“Let’s just say Pete’s a man with a vision, okay? And we bought into it.”

Silence prevailed for a time, until the other Slykes returned.

They walked slightly stooped forward, with their Nuvaderms featuring large camel-like humps between their shoulder blades.

Ruy learned that the Slykes had filled bladders in their skins with water from the nearest little Badlands pond. Now the squid-derived cells in their skins were busy turning the water to colorful paint, which would be sprayed from Nuvaderm extrusions with inkjet action.

Despite himself, Ruy was fascinated. “Could my skin do that?”

“If you downloaded the right apps, hombre,” said Rick.

Pete, Patton, Koren and Rick advanced to the bases of the Spires, each Slyke choosing a separate hoodoo. Then they began to climb, without equipment of any sort.

Rachel said, “Gecko app. Works brill, but you can still fall.” She rubbed a sore elbow.

Soon the Slykes were raisin-sized bugs high up the Spires. New rainbow desecrations began to blossom.

Ruy sighed dramatically and stalked away with his back to the sacrilege.

“Hey, don’t wander off too far!”

Ruy took up a perch on a massive flat-topped boulder and tried to calm himself and to plan. If only he could retrieve his thinking cap—

The Slykes aloft worked tirelessly, but Rachel, Ruy ascertained with sidelong glances, was growing bored. Around noon she apparently reached the limits of her dispassionate oneness with existence. She joined Ruy on his boulder.

“Hey, wanna fool around?”

Ruy just goggled. Suddenly the lines of Rachel’s breast and haunches looked positively pornographic.

“C’mon, I’m not a monster! It’ll be fun. You must be a little horny, aren’t you? Wearing the skin always stokes an undercurrent of horniness—at least for me. And I’ve had sex with the other four so many times in every possible way that I could really go for someone new.”

Rachel’s breasts were indeed very shapely. “I don’t like to have sex wearing the skin,” Ruy said, realizing even as he spoke how priggish he sounded.

“Oh, no problem. We’ll unzip.”

“What about some privacy?”

“Got that covered too. Lie down.”

Cautiously, Ruy complied. Rachel lay atop him, synthetic skin to synthetic skin.

Ruy suddenly felt his skin splitting in the standard shedding protocol, under some override instructions from Rachel’s suit, transmitted either wetly or via übertooth. Even the inseams of the suit’s arms and legs were opening! But instead of exposing him to the air, his rogue skin melded its edges to Rachel’s similarly unfurling armor, green to red, like two Christmas-themed sleeping bags being zipped together. Ruy felt Rachel’s bare flesh against his chest. Her nasal feeding tube retracted itself with an icky snot-slurping noise.

Soon, by wriggling most pleasantly, the humans were able to disengage themselves completely from the migrating Nuvaderm sleeves and legs. Rachel’s suit, the upper half of a hemisphere, had stretched and stiffened like a tent, under some app Ruy did not recognize. The conjoined neckhole, now positioned above their heads, admitted light and air like a porthole. His own green skin had inflated noticeably, like a thin air mattress, a capability heretofore unrecognized. (What bad apps had Rachel infected it with?) The lovers were cocooned in an organic shell.

Rachel’s thinking cap had been revealed when her hood retracted. Ruy contemplated snatching it, but was soon too busy. Kissing, biting, squeezing, Rachel got into cowgirl mode atop Ruy. God, her thighs were like iron! Still liana’d—a condition that loaned an extra layer of kinkiness to the situation, as if any more exoticism were needed—he coped manfully. She found him more than ready, and guided him into her wetness.

They had sex three times in three-quarters of an hour, then collapsed in exhaustion.

Rachel said, “Nice ride, pardner.” Ruy just grinned with a measure of uneasy guilt.

When the Nuvaderm tent became psychologically oppressive, though still environmentally friendly, they began the intricate process of redonning their

separate suits.

Finally separate and re-skinned, they noted the Slykes descending the Spires. Rachel became hardnosed again, and glared at Ruy.

“If you—”

“I am not,” said Ruy, “the kind to molt and tell.”

5.

Gertie Goes for a Walk

All during the long hike to the mysterious Cadmus site, Koren Lovat glared at Ruy. He couldn’t be sure, however, if she were jealous that he had had sex with Rachel, or that Rachel had had sex with him. Ultimately, the nice distinction seemed trivial in terms of Ruy’s comfort index.

Paleo Pecos Pete led the parade, cheerful as a prairie dog in its warren. His mood had brightened when, a day after leaving the Spires, he had evidently received some mysterious telemetry.

“Ah, the dragon teeth are almost ripe! This will be magnificent!”

Pete refused to disclose more to Ruy at that moment, and so he had hiked on in ignorance. No further intimacy with Rachel occurred to enliven the trek. And the other Slykes were taciturn at best. Their idolect stymied Ruy’s eavesdropping.

Finally the little band reached the banks of the Red Deer River. Naturally, conditions were more fertile here, although still harsh by most North American measures. Colorful grasses abounded, as well as the occasional cottonwood. Butterflies and birds stitched the air. The friable soil of the valley stretched expansively on either side of the watercourse.

Pete designated a camp at dusk, a seemingly random spot much like any neighboring site. A fire was kindled, the last of Ruy’s MRE’s apportioned, and Big Dog was shut down, its dynamo disabled to prevent Ruy from making a midnight escape.

As the Slykes and Ruy sat around the campfire, on a star-spangled night finally exhibiting some of the pre-Greenhouse chill once deemed “normal” for October, Pete felt free to reveal something of his scheme to Ruy.

“Do you know about mining synthicrobes?”

“Yes, of course. You sow them and they aggregate whatever mineral or other substance they were programmed to harvest.”

“Well, I have sown some in this very valley, and they are about to deliver.”

“Deliver what?”

“A dinosaur. A Gorgosaurus, to be exact. My pet species.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s simple. A stroke of genius on my part, if I may say so, but still conceptually simple. None of the self-styled experts thought my idea had merit. They all laughed, in fact. But you’ll all soon bear witness to how well it works.”

Made captive, sexed-up almost against his will, deprived of mental contact with his skin, half-starved and trotted hither and yon, Ruy found his patience just about at an end. “Okay, you’re not in the lecture hall any more, *professor*.” Ruy’s ineffectual sarcasm betokened his Canadian origins as effectively as his passport. “Just give!”

Pete remained cheerful. “I contracted with a Hong Kong tailoring firm, and they produced a synthicrobe smart enough to dig for fossils. Specifically, this model targets remnant Gorgosaurus DNA, however fragmentary. Whenever they find a relevant fossil, working from their complete onboard plans, they excavate it from the rock matrix.”

Despite himself, Ruy was impressed. “That is pretty cool. A definite advance in paleontology, I’d say. I’m surprised the idea was rejected out of hand. There must be more to it than that.”

“Yes. The bugs are also assembling the complete skeleton underground, in situ. Burrowing and moving bits about. As you can imagine, it’s been a long slow process.”

“Is that all?”

Pete smiled, his hood-framed face illuminated in an eerie, horror-show-host manner by flickering flames. “No. A second set of synthicrobes is fleshing out the skeleton a bit. Just enough to get it mobile. Creating any missing bony parts, and linking everything with artificial sinews, muscles and ganglia. All synthesized from ambient minerals and biomass.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Having these bugs sartorized cost me my entire retirement fund. You’ll see in the morning whether I’m lying or not.”

Ruy contemplated this revelation. Then he asked, “What kind of dinosaur is Gorgosaurus?”

“A T. Rex.”

And with that, the formal cocktail hour was over and the Slykes retired for the evening.

Ruy slept fitfully all night, dreaming of various disasters, many involving Godzilla and other kaiju. Finally, he woke from the phantasm of facing Chinese water torture—to find that his chest and face were actually wet. Was it raining? Dawn seemed imminent in a clear sky, but the Slykes still slept. Ruy sat up.

Proty stood beside him. Still dripping, the protoplasmic drone blurrily resembled a beaver or other amphibious mammal, with broad tail and webbed paws. A damp trail led to the riverbank. As Ruy watched, the drone morphed to its doughboy shape.

Ruy held up his tethered wrists and whispered, “Get these off me, Proty.”

The drone examined the living handcuffs by manual palpation. Their normal release was mediated by thinking cap. But now a sizzling sound came to Ruy, as Proty dispensed something corrosive. Ruy’s hands came free. Shortly the bonds on his ankles met the same fate.

Ruy gained his feet as silently as he could. His one objective was to put as much distance between himself and the Slykes as possible. He’d return with law enforcement professionals to round them up—

Ruy’s arms were yanked back behind him in a brutal wrestler’s grip. Patton Mantooth had crept up from the rear and pinioned him.

The other Slykes were soon awakened to confront the foiled escapee in the rosy early light of day.

Pete faced Ruy. “Is this how you repay—”

The renegade academic’s words were cut short by the hailstorm rattle of a shower of soil and stones. Everyone turned to face the disturbance.

A large swath of ground on the far side of the river was heaving and churning in a localized quake, like dirt porridge in a hot cauldron.

The top of a large polished skull poked up into the air. Then, explosively, the rest of the Gorgosaurus launched into view, as if springing from an underground diving board.

The towering, titanic dinosaur was a nightmare in white and black. The dirty white of its fossilized bones, threaded with black carbon-nanotube sinews and muscles. Distributed ebony ganglia clung like clusters of grapes to its frame. This lacework but substantial apparition resembled an old-

fashioned plastinated corpse: flensed, with all its subdermal mechanisms on display.

“Gertie!” yelled Pete ecstatically. “Gertie lives!”

Ruy turned to Rachel. “Gertie?”

“It’s what he’s always called her. After some old cartoon. She’s animated by some apps downloaded from the *Jurassic Park* MUD. Should be pretty safe….”

Besotted, Pete darted forward, right into the shallow river up to his knees. “Come to Papa, Gertie! Pick me up now! Time for walkies!”

The dinosaur’s little arms did not respond properly. Furrowing his brow, Pete plainly found his telemetry to the stitched-together revenant being ignored, due to unforeseen cascading glitches within Gertie’s independent onboard processing units.

“Gertie—” Pete began.

And then, in a blink, the Gorgosaurus had Pete in its jaws.

Everyone screamed.

A crunching and grinding noise marked Pete’s gory demise.

Patton had instinctively released Ruy. The Slykes began to back away from the dinosaur. Yet in the open level land, there was no escape.

But Ruy had a hope.

“Give me a thinking cap! Now!”

No one reacted fast enough, so he peeled back Patton’s hood and grabbed the cyber-reticule off his head. He slapped it hurriedly on his own scalp, then picked up Proty. The drone nestled automatically against Ruy’s chest, like a friendly koala.

“I’m sorry, pal. I hope you understand.”

Ruy popped up Proty’s onboard menu, raced through some choices, then sent the command that turned Proty into a dedicated factory for pumping out a certain self-replicating attack synthicrobe keyed to carbon nanotubes.

Inexplicably, a second window opened up in Ruy’s vision. It depicted not any local feed, but rather a recorded snippet. The little loop showed the UCalgary kennel, with Dr. Grigori bending over to stroke the recording entity: Proty in his nest.

The Gorgosaurus was crossing the river now, its mountainous tread shaking the ground. Closer, closer, swaying head lowering to gobble—

Ruy could wait no longer. With all his strength he hurled Proty into the monster’s open mouth. A stone tooth pierced the drone as if it were a ripe grape, and Proty splattered his contents.

The rapidly autocatalytic bugs proliferated up and down the network of carbon nanotubes. In seconds the substance they secreted began to eat away at the black fibers. First the lower jaw of the Gorgosaurus fell off, and then in a swift cascade all its other parts clattered and splashed separately to the ground and river.

The Slykes had paused in their desperate scramble. Ruy asserted himself boldly into their leaderless pecking order. “Get Big Dog alive, and put Pete’s body on it. We’re heading back to civilization.”

As they marched off, Ruy snugged his thinking cap on more firmly and ran some diagnostics on his Nuvaderm.

It was good to feel comfortable again in his own skin.

FarmEarth

I couldn’t wait until I turned thirteen, so I could play FarmEarth. I kept pestering all three of my parents every day to let me download the FarmEarth app into my memtax. What a little makulit I must have been! I see it now, from the grownup vantage of sixteen, and after all the trouble I eventually caused. Every minute with whines like “What difference does six months make?” And “But didn’t I get high marks in all my omics classes?” And what I thought was the irrefutable clincher, “But Benno got to play when he was only eleven!”

“Look now, please, Crispian,” my egg-Mom Darla would calmly answer, “six months makes a big difference when you’re just twelve-point-five. That’s four percent of your life up to this date. You can mature a lot in six months.”

Darla worked as an osteo-engineer, hyper-tweaking fab files for living prosthetics, as if you couldn’t tell.

“But Crispian,” my mito-Mom Kianna would imperturbably answer, “you also came close to failing integral social plectics, and you know that’s nearly as important for playing FarmEarth as your omics.”

Kianna worked as a hostess for the local NASDAQ Casino. She had hustled more drinks than the next two hostesses combined, and been number one in tips for the past three years.

“But Crispian,” my lone dad Marcelo Tanjuatco would irrefutably reply (I had taken “Tanjuatco,” his last name, as mine, which is why I mention it here), “Benno has a different mito-Mom than you. And you know how special and respected Zoysia is, and how long and hard even she had to petition to get Benno early acceptance.”

Dad didn’t work, at least not for anyone but the polybond. He stayed home, cooking meals, optimizing the house dynamics, and of course playing FarmEarth, just like every other person over thirteen who wasn’t a maximal grebnard.

The way Dad—and everyone else—pronounced Zoysia’s name—all smug, reverential and dreamy—just denatured my proteome, and I had to protest.

“But Benno and I still share your genes and Darla’s! That’s ninety percent right there! Zoysia’s only ten percent.”

“And you share ninety-five percent of your genes with any random chimp,” said Darla. “And they can’t play FarmEarth either. At least not maybe until that new generation of kymes come online.”

I knew when I was beaten, so I mumbled and grumbled and retreated to the room I shared with Benno.

Of course, at an hour before suppertime he just had to be there, and playing FarmEarth.

My big brother Benno was a default-amp kid. His resting brain state had been permanently overclocked in the womb, so even when he wasn’t consciously “thinking” he was processing information faster than you or me. And when he really focused on something, you could smell the neurons burning.

But no good fairy ever gave a gift without a catch. Benno’s outward affect was, well, “interiorized.” He always seemed to be listening to some silent voice, even when he was having a conversation with someone. And I’m not talking about the way all of us sometimes pay more attention to our auricular implants and the scenes displayed on our memtax than we do to the person facing us.

Needless to say, puffy-faced Benno didn’t have much of social life, even at age sixteen. Not that he seemed to care.

Lying on his back on the lower bunk of our sleeping pod, Benno stared at some unknown landscape in his memtax, working his haptic finger bling faster than the Mandarin’s grandson trying to take down Tony Stark’s clone in *Iron Man 10*.

I tried to tap into his FarmEarth feed with my own memtax, even though I knew the dataflow was encrypted. But all that happened was that I got bounced to Benno’s public CitizenSpace.

I sat down on the edge of the mattress beside him, and poked him in the ribs. He didn’t even flinch.

“Hey, B-man, whatcha doing?”

Benno’s voice was a monotone even when he was excited about something, and dealing with his noodgy little brother was low on his list of thrills.

“I’m grooming the desert-treeline ecotone in Mali. Now go away.”

“Wow! That is so stellar! Are you planting new trees?”

“No, I’m upgrading rhizome production on the existing ones.”

“What kind of effectuators are you using?”

“ST5000 Micromites. Now. Go. Away!”

I shoved Benno hard. “Jerk! Why don’t you ever share with me! I just wanna play too!”

I jumped up and stalked off before he could retaliate, but he didn’t even bother to respond.

So there you have typical day in the latter half of my thirteenth year. Desperate pleas on my part to graduate to adulthood, followed by admonitions from my parents to be patient, then by jealousy and inattention from my big brother.

As you can well imagine, the six similar months till I turned thirteen passed by like a Plutonian year (just checked via memtax: 248 Earth years). But finally—finally!—I turned thirteen and got my very own log-on to FarmEarth.

And that’s when the real frustration started!

* * * *

Kicking a living hackysack is a lot more fun in meatspace than it is via memtax. You can feel muscles other than those in your fingers getting a workout. Your bare toes dig into the grass. You smell sweat and soil. You get sprayed with salt water on a hot day. You get to congratulatorily hug warm girls afterwards if any are in the circle with you. So even though all the kids gripe about having to leave their houses every day for two whole shared hours of meatspace schooling at the nearest Greenpatch, I guess that, underneath all our complaints, we really like being face to face with our peers once in a while.

That fateful day when we first decided to hack FarmEarth, there were six of us kicking around the sack. Me, Mallory, Cheo, Vernice, Anuta, and Williedell—my best friends.

The sack was an old one, and didn’t have much life left in it. A splice of ctenophore, siphonophore, and a few other marine creatures, including bladder kelp, the soft warty green globe could barely jet enough salt water to change its mid-air course erratically as intended. Kicking it got too predictable pretty fast.

Sensing what we were all feeling and acting first, Cheo, tall and quick, grabbed the sack on one of its feeble arcs and tossed it like a basketball into the nearby aquarium—splash!—where it sank listlessly to the bottom of the tank. Poor old sponge.

“Two points!” said Vernice. Vernice loved basketball more than anything, and was convinced she was going to play for the Havana Ocelotes some day. She hugged Cheo, and that triggered a round of mutal embraces. I squeezed Anuta’s slim brown body—she wore just short-shorts and a belly shirt—a little extra, trying to convey some of the special feelings I had for her, but I couldn’t tell if any of my emotions got communicated. Girls are hard to figure sometime.

Williedell ambled slow and easy in his usual way over to the solar-butane fridge and snagged six Cokes. We dropped to the grass under the shade of the big tulip-banyan at the edge of the Greenpatch and sucked down the cold soda greedily. Life was good.

And then our FarmEarth teacher had to show up.

Now, I know you’re saying, “Huh? I thought Crispian Tanjuatco was that guy who could hardly wait to turn thirteen so he could play FarmEarth. Isn’t that parity?”

Well, that was how I felt before I actually got FarmEarth beginner privileges, and came up against all the rules and restrictions and duties that went with our lowly ranking. True to form, the adults had managed to suck all the excitement and fun and thrills out of what should have been sweet as planoforming—at least at the entry level for thirteen-year-olds, who were always getting the dirty end of the control rod.

“Hi, kids! Who’s ready to shoulder-surf some pseudomonads?”

The minutely flexing, faintly flickering OLED circuitry of my memtax, powered off my bioelectricity, painted my retinas with the grinning translucent face of Purvis Mumphrey. Past his ghostlike augie-real appearance, I could still see all my friends and their reactions.

Round as a moonpie, framed by wispy blonde hair, Mumphrey’s face revealed, we all agreed, a deep sadness beneath his bayou bonhomie. His sadness related, in fact, to the assignment before us.

Everyone groaned, and that made our teacher look even sadder.

“Aw, Mr. Mumphrey, do we hafta?” “We’re too tired now from our game.” “Can’t we do it later?”

“Students, please. How will you ever get good enough at FarmEarth to move up to master level, unless you practice now?”

Master level. That was the lure, the tease, the hook, the far-off pinnacle of freedom and responsibility that we all aspired to. Being in charge of a big mammal, or a whole forest, say. Who wouldn’t want that? Acting to help Gaia in her crippled condition, to make up for the shitty way our species had treated the planet, stewarding important things actually large enough to see.

But for now, six months into our novice status, all we had in front of us was riding herd on a zillion hungry bacteria. That was all the adults trusted us to handle. The prospect was about as exciting as watching your navel lint accumulate.

At this moment, Mr. Mumphrey looked about ready to cry. This assignment meant a lot to him.

Our teacher had been born in Louisiana, prior to the Deepwater Horizon blowout. He had been just our age, son of a shrimper, when that drilling rig went down and the big spew filled the Gulf with oil for too many months. Now, twenty years later, we were still cleaning up that mess.

So rather than see our teacher break down and weep, which would have been yotta-yucky, we groaned some more just to show we weren’t utterly buying his sales pitch, got into comfortable positions around the shade tree (I wished I could have put my head into Anuta’s lap, but I didn’t dare), and booted up our FarmEarth apps.

Mr. Mumphrey had access to our feeds, so he could monitor what we did. That just added an extra layer of insult to the way we were treated like babies.

Instantly, we were out of augie overlays and into full virt.

I was point-of-view embedded deep in the dark waters of the Gulf, in the middle of a swarm of oil-eating bacteria, thanks to the audiovideo feed from a host of macro-effectuators that hovered on their impellors, awaiting our orders. The cloud of otherwise invisible bugs around us glowed with fabricated luminescence. Fish swam into and out of the radiance, which was supplemented by spotlights onboard the effectuators.

Many of the fish showed yotta-yucky birth defects.

The scene in my memtax also displayed a bunch of useful supplementary data: our GPS location, thumbnails of other people running FarmEarth in

our neighborhood, a window showing a view of the surface above our location, weather reports—common stuff like that. If I wanted to, I could bring up the individual unique ID numbers on the fish, and even for each single bacteria.

I got ahold of the effectuator assigned to me, feeling its controls through my haptic finger bling, and made it swerve at the machine being run by Anuta.

“Hey, Crispy Critter, watch it!” she said with that sexy Bollywood accent of hers.

Mumphs was not pleased. “Mr. Tanjuatco, you will please concentrate on the task at hand. Now, students, last week’s Hurricane Norbert churned up a swath of relatively shallow sediment north of our present site, revealing a lode of undigested hydrocarbons. It’s up to us to clean them up. Let’s drive these hungry bugs to the site.”

Williedell and Cheo and I made cowboy whoops, while the girls just clucked their tongues and got busy. Pretty soon, using water jets and shaped sonics aboard the effectuators, we had created a big invisible water bubble full of bugs that we could move at will. We headed north, over anemones and octopi, coral and brittle stars. Things looked pretty good, I had to say, considering all the crap the Gulf had been through. That’s what made FarmEarth so rewarding and addictive, seeing how you could improve on these old tragedies.

But herding bugs underwater was hardly high-profile or awesome, no matter how real the resulting upgrades were. It was basically like spinning the composter at your home: a useful duty that stunk.

We soon got the bugs to the site and mooshed them into the tarry glop where they could start remediating.

“Nom, nom, nom,” said Mallory. Mallory had the best sense of humor for a girl I had ever seen.

“Nom, nom, nom,” I answered back. Then all six of us were nom-nom-noming away, while Mumphs pretended not to find it funny.

But even that joke wore out after a while, and our task of keeping the bugs centered on their meal, rotating fresh stock in to replace sated ones, got so boring I was practically falling asleep.

Eventually, Mumphs said, “Okay, we have a quorum of replacement Farmers lined up, so you can all log out.”

I came out of FarmEarth a little disoriented, like people always do, especially when you've been stewarding in a really unusual environment. I didn't know how my brother Benno kept any sense of reality after he spent so much time in so many exotic FarmEarth settings. The familiar Greenpatch itself looked odd to me, like my friends should have been fishes or something, instead of people. I could tell the others were feeling the same way, and so we broke up for the day with some quiet goodbyes.

By the time I got home, to find my fave supper of goat empanadas and cassava-leaf stew laid on by Dad, with both Moms able to be there too, I had already forgotten how bored and disappointed playing FarmEarth had left me.

But apparently, Cheo had not.

* * * *

The vertical playsurface at Gecko Guy's Climbzone was made out of MEMs, just like a pair of memtax. To the naked eye, the climbing surface looked like a grey plastic wall studded with permanent handholds and footholds, little grippable irregular nubbins. But the composition of near-nanoscopic addressable scales meant that the wall was instantly and infinitely configurable.

Which is why, halfway up the six-meter climb, I suddenly felt the hold under my right hand, which was supporting all my weight, evaporate, sending me scrabbling wildly for another.

But every square centimeter within my reach was flat.

The floor, even though padded, was a long way off, and of course I had no safety line.

So even though I was reluctant to grebnard out, I activated the artificial setae in my gloves and booties, and slammed them against the wall.

One glove and one bootie stuck, slowing me enough to position my second hand and foot. I clung flat to the wall, catching my breath, then began to scuttle like a crab to the nearest projecting holds, the setae making ripping sounds as they pulled away each time.

A few meters to my left, Williedell laughed and called out, "Ha-ha, Crispy had to go gecko!"

"Yeah, like you never did three times last week! Race you to the top!"

Starting to scramble upward as fast as I could, I risked a glance at Anuta to see if she were laughing at my lameness. But she wasn't even looking my way, just hanging in place and gossiping with Mallory and Vernice.

Sometimes I think girls have no real sense of competition.

But then I remember how much attention they pay to their stupid clothes.

Williedell and I reached the top of the wall at roughly the same time, and gave each other a fistbump.

Down on the floor, Cheo hailed us. "Hey, Crispian, almost got you that time, didn't I!"

Cheo's parents owned the Climbzone, and so the five of us got to play for free in the slowest hours—like now, eight AM on a Sunday. Cheo had to work a few hours on the weekends—mainly just handing out gloves and booties and instructing newbies—so he couldn't climb with us. Of course, he had access via his memtax to the wall controls, and had disappeared my handhold on purpose.

I yelled back, "Next time we're eating underwater goo, you're getting a faceful!"

For some reason, my silly remark made Cheo look sober and thoughtful. "Hey, guys, c'mon down! I want to talk about something with you."

The girls must have been paying some attention to our antics, because they responded to Cheo's request and began lowering themselve to the floor. Pretty soon, all five of us were gathered around Cheo.

There were no other paying customers at the moment.

"Let me just close up the place for a few minutes."

Cheo locked the entrance doors and posted a public augie sign saying BACK IN FIFTEEN MINUTES. Then we all went and sat at the snackbar. As always, Williedell made sure we were all supplied with drinks. We joked that he was going to grow up to be flight attendant on a Amazonian aerostat—but we didn't make the joke too often, since he flared up sensitive about always instinctively acting the host. (I think he got those hospitality habits because he was the oldest in his semi-dysfunctional family and always taking care of his sibs.)

Cheo looked us up and down and then said, "Who's happy with our sludge-eating FarmEarth assignments? Anyone?"

"Nope." "Not me." "I swear I can taste oil and sardines after every run."

That last from Mallory.

“And you know we’ve got at least another six months of this kind of drudgery until we ramp up maybe half a level, right?”

Groans all around.

“Well, what would you say if I could get us playing at a higher level right away? Maybe even at master status!”

Vernice said, “Oh, sure, and how’re you gonna do that? I could see if Crispy here maybe said he had a way to bribe his Aunt Zoysia. She’s got real enchufe.”

“Yeah, well, I know someone with real enchufe too. My brother.”

Everyone fell silent. Then Anuta said quietly, “But Cheo, your brother is in prison.”

As far as we all knew, this was true. Cheo’s big brother Adán had got five years for subverting FarmEarth. He had misused effectuators to cultivate a few hectares of chiba in the middle of the Pantanal reserve. The charges against him, however, had nothing to do with the actual dope, because of course chiba was legal as chewing gum. But he had misappropriated public resources, avoided excise taxes on his crop, and indirectly caused the death of a colony of protected capybaras by diverting the effectuators that might have been used to save them from some bushmeat poachers. Net punishment: five years hospitality from the federales.

Cheo looked a bit ashamed at his brother’s misdeeds. “He’s not in prison anymore. He got out a year early. He racked up some good time for helping administer FarmEarth among the jail population. You think we got shitty assignments! How would you like to steward gigundo manure lagoons! Anyhow, he’s a free man now, and he’s looking for some help with a certain project. In return, the people he takes on get master status. It may not be strictly aboveboard, but it’s really just a kind of shortcut to where we’re heading already.”

I instantly had my doubts about Adán and his schemes. If only I had listened to my gut, we could have avoided a lot of grief. But I asked, “What is this mysterious project?”

“In jail, Adán hooked up with Los Braceros Últimos. You know about them, right?”

“No. What’s their story?”

“They think FarmEarth is being run too conservatively. The planet is still at the tipping point. We need to do bigger things faster. No more tip-toeing

around with little fixes. No more being over-cautious. Get everybody working on making Gaia completely self-sustaining again. And the Braceros want to free up humanity from being Earth's thermostat and immune system and liver."

"Yeah!" said Williedell, pumping his fist in the air. Mallory and Vernice were nodding their heads in agreement. Anuta looked with calm concern to me, as if to see what I thought.

Four to two.

I didn't want to drag everyone else down. And I *was* pretty sick of the boring, trivial assignments we were limited to in FarmEarth. All I could suddenly picture was all the fun that Benno had every day. My own brother! Ninety percent my own brother anyhow. I felt a wave of jealousy and greed that swept away any doubts. The feelings made me bold enough to take Anuta's hand and say, "Count us in too!"

And after that, it was way too late to back out.

* * * *

We met Adán in the flesh just once. The seven of us foursquared a rendezvous at the NASDAQ Casino where my Mom Kianna worked. The venue was cheap and handy. Because we weren't adults, we couldn't go out onto the gaming floor, where the Bundled Mortgages Craps Table and Junk Bond Roulette Wheels and all the other games of investa-chance were. But the exclusion was good, because that was where Mom hustled drinks, so we wouldn't bump into her.

But the Casino also featured an all-ages café with live music, and I said, "We shouldn't try to sneak around with this scheme. That'll just attract suspicion. We've hung out at the Casino before, so no one will think twice to see us there."

Everyone instantly agreed, and I felt a glow of pride.

So one Friday night, while we listened to some neo-Baithak Gana by Limekiller and the Manatees (the woman playing dholak was yotta-sexy) and sipped delicious melano-rambutan smoothies, we got the lowdown from Cheo's brother.

Adán resembled Cheo in a brotherly way, except with more muscles, a scraggly mustache, and a bad fashion sense that encouraged a sparkly vest of unicorn hair over a bare chest painted with an e-ink display screen

showing cycling porn snippets. Grebnard! Did he imagine this place was some kind of craigslist meat market?

The porn scenes on Adán's chest—soundless, thank god—were very distracting, and I felt embarrassed for the girls—although they really didn't seem too hassled. Now, in hindsight, I figure maybe Adán was trying to unfocus our thinking on purpose.

Luckily the café was fairly dark, and the e-ink display wasn't backlit, so most of the scenes were just squirming blobs that I could ignore while Adán talked.

After he sized us up with some casual chat, he said, "You kids are getting in on the ground floor of something truly great. In the future, you'll be remembered as the greatest generation, the people who had the foresight to take bold moves to bring the planet back from the brink. All this tentative shit FarmEarth authorizes now, half-measures and fallback options and minor tweaks, is gonna take forever to put Gaia back on her feet. But Los Braceros Últimos is all about kickass rejuvenation treatment, big results fast!"

"What exactly would we have to do?" Anuta asked.

"Just steward some effectuators where and how we tell you. Nothing more than you're doing now at school. You won't necessarily get to know the ultimate goal of your work right from the start—we have to keep some things secret—but when it's over, I can guarantee you'll be mega-stoked."

We all snickered at Adán's archaic slang.

"And what do we get in return?" I said.

Adán practically leered. "FarmEarth Master status, under untraceable proxies, to use however you want—in your spare time."

Williedell said, "I don't know. We'll have to keep up our regular FarmEarth assignments, plus yours… When will we ever *have* any spare time?"

Adán shrugged. "Not my problem. If you really want Master status, you'll give up something else and manage to carve out some time. If not—well, I've got plenty of other potential stewards lined up. I'm only doing this as a favor to my little bro' after all…"

"No, no, we want to sign up!" "Yeah, I'm in!" "Me too!"

Adán smiled. "All right. In the next day or two, you'll find a FarmEarth key in your CitizenSpace. When you use it, you'll get instructions on your assignment. Good luck. I gotta go now."

After Adán left, we all looked at each other a little sheepishly, wondering what we had gotten ourselves into. But then Mallory raised her glass and said, “To the Secret Masters of FarmEarth!”

We clinked rims, sipped, and imagined what we could do with our new powers.

* * * *

The mystery project the six of us were given was called “Angry Sister,” and it proved to be just as boring as our regular FarmEarth tasks.

Three years later, I think this qualifies as some kind of yotta-ironic joke. But none of us found it too funny at the time.

We were tasked with running rugged subterranean effectuators—John Deere Molebots—somewhere in the world, carving out a largish tubular tunnel from Point A to Point B. We didn’t know where we were, because the GPS feed from the molebots had been deactivated. We guided our cutting route instead by triangulation via encrypted signals from some surface radio beacons and reference to an engineering schematic. The molebots were small and slow: the six of us barely managed to chew up two cubic meters of stone in a three-hour shift. A lot of time was spent ferrying the detritus back to the surface and disposing of it in the nearby anonymous ocean.

The mental strain of stewarding the machines grew very tiresome.

“Why can’t these stupid machines run themselves?” Vernice complained over our secure communications channel. “Isn’t that why weak AI was invented?”

Cheo answered, “You know that AI is forbidden in FarmEarth. Don’t you remember the lesson Mumphs gave us about Detroit?”

“Oh, right.”

A flock of macro-effectuators had been set loose demolishing smart-tagged derelict buildings in that city. But then Detroit’s Highwaymen motorcycle outlaws, having a grudge against the mayor, had cracked the tags and affixed them to Manoogian Mansion, the official mayoral residence.

Once the pajama-clad mayor and his half-naked shrieking family were removed from their perch on a teetering fragment of Manoogian Mansion

roof, it took only twenty-four hours for both houses of Congress to forbid use of AI in FarmEarth.

“Besides,” Mallory chimed in, “with nine billion people on the planet, human intelligence is the cheapest commodity.”

“And,” said Anuta, “having people steward the effectuators encourages responsible behavior, social bonding, repentance and contrition for mankind’s sins.”

Williedell made a rude noise at this bit of righteous FarmEarth catechism, and I felt compelled to stand up for Anuta by banging my drill bit into Williedell’s machine.

Vernice said, “All right, all right, I give up! We’re stuck here, so let’s just do it. And you two, quit your pissing contest!”

The six of us went back to moodily chewing up strata.

After a month of this, our little set had begun to unravel a tad. Each day, when our secret shift of moonlighting was over, none of us wanted to hang together. We were all sick of each other, and just wanted to get away to play with our Master status.

And that supreme privilege did indeed almost make up for all the boredom and tedium of the scutwork.

Maybe you’ve played FarmEarth as a Master yourself. (But I bet you didn’t have to worry, like us six fakes did, about giving yourself away to the real Masters with some misplaced comment. The paranoia was mild but constant.) If so, you know what I’m talking about.

You’ve guided a flock of aerostatic effectuators through gaudy polar stratospheric clouds, sequestering CFCs.

You’ve guarded nesting mama Kemp’s Ridley turtles from feral dogs.

You’ve quarried the Great Pacific Garbage Patch for materials that artists riding ships have turned on the spot into found sculptures that sell for muy plata.

You’ve draped skyscrapers with vertical farms.

You’ve channeled freshets into the nearly dead Aral Sea, and restocked those reborn waters.

You’ve midwifed at the birth of a hundred species of animals: tranked mamas in the wild whose embryos were mis-positioned for easy birth, and would have otherwise died.

That last item reminds me of something kinda embarrassing.

Playing FarmEarth with big mammals can be tricky, as I found out one day. They're too much like humans.

I was out in Winnemucca, Nevada, among a herd of wild horses. The FarmEarth assignment I had picked off a duty roster was to provide the herd with its annual Encephalomyelitis vaccinations. That always happened in the spring, and now it was time.

My effectuator was a little rolligon that barreled across the prairie disguised as tumbleweed. When I got near a horse, I would spring up with my onboard folded legs, grab its mane, give the injection, then drop off quickly.

But after a while, I got bored a little, and so I hung on to this one horse to enjoy the ride. The stallion got real freaky, dashing this way and that, but then it settled down a bit, still galloping. I was having some real thrills.

And that was when my ride encountered a mare.

I hadn't realized that spring was breeding time for the mustangs.

Before I could disengage amidst the excitement and confusion, the stallion was sporting a boner the size of Rhode Island, and was covering the mare.

I noticed now that the mare wore a vaccinating effectuator too.

The haptic feedback, even though it didn't go direct to my crotch, was still having its effect on my own dick. It felt weird and creepy—but too good to give up.

Before I could quite climax in my pants, the titanic horsey sex was over, and the male and female broke apart.

Very cautiously, I pinged the other FarmEarth player. They could always refuse to respond.

Anuta answered.

Back home in my bedroom, my face burned a thousand degrees hot. I was sure hers was burning too. We couldn't even say a word to each other. In another minute, she had broken the communications link.

When we next met in the flesh, we didn't refer to the incident in so many words. But we felt compelled to get away from the others and make out a little.

After a while, by mutual consent, we just sort of dribbled to a stop, without having done much more than snog and grope.

“I guess,” said Anuta, “that unless we mean to go all the way, we won’t get to where we were the other day.”

“Yeah, I suppose. And even then….”

She nodded her head in silent agreement. Regular people sex was going to have to be pretty special to live up to the equine sex we had vicariously experienced in FarmEarth.

I felt at that moment that maybe FarmEarth Master privileges were kept away from us kids for a reason.

And a few weeks later, when everything came crashing down, I was certain of it.

* * * *

My Moms and Dad were all out of the house that fateful late afternoon. I was lying in bed at home, bored and chewing up subsoils with my pals and their effectuators, eking out a conduit which we had been told, by Adán, represented the last few yards of tunnel, in accordance with our schematics, when I felt a poke in my ribs. I disengaged from FarmEarth, coming out of augie space, and saw my dull-faced brother Benno hovering over me.

“Crispian,” he said, “do you know where you are?”

“Yeah, sure, I’m eating up hydrocarbons in the Gulf. Nom, nom, nom, good little Crispy Critter.”

“Your statement exists in non-compliance with reality.”

“Oh, just go away, Benno, and leave me alone.”

I dived back into augie space, eager to get this boring “Angry Sister” assignment over with. We were all hoping that the next task Adán gave us would be more glamorous and exciting. We all wanted to feel that we were big, bold cyber-cowboys of the planet, riding Gaia’s range, on the lookout for eco-rustlers, repairing broken fences. But of course, even without star-quality assignments, we still had the illicit Master privileges to amuse—and scare—us.

“Hey,” said Mallory when I returned to our subterranean workspace, “where’d you go?”

“Yeah,” chimed in Vernice, “no slacking off!”

“Oh, it was just my stupid grebnard brother. He wanted to harass me about something.”

Cheo said, “That’s Benno, right? Isn’t his mom Zoysia van Vollenhoven? I heard he’s hot stuff in FarmEarth. Inherited all his Mom’s chops, plus more. Maybe he had something useful to tell you.”

“I doubt it. He’s probably just jealous of me now.”

Anuta sounded worried. “You don’t think he knows anything about what we’re doing?”

“No way. I just mean that he sees me playing FarmEarth eagerly all the time now, so he must have some idea I’m enjoying myself, and that pisses him off. He’s always been jealous of me.”

At that moment, I felt a hand clamp onto my ankle in meatspace, and I was dragged out of bed with a *thump*! I vacated my John Deere and confronted Benno from my humiliating position on the floor.

“What exactly is the matter with you, Ben? Do you have a short-circuit in your strap-on brain?”

Benno’s normally impassive face showed as much emotion as it ever did, like say at Christmas, when he got some grebnard present he had always wanted. The massive agitation amounted to some squinted eyes and trembling lower lip.

“If you do not want to admit your ignorance, Crispian, I will simply tell you where you are. You are at these coordinates: sixty-three degrees, thirty-eight minutes north, and nineteen degrees, three minutes west.”

I didn’t bother using my memtax to look up that latitude and longitude, because I didn’t want to give Benno’s accusations any weight. So I just sarcastically asked, “And where exactly is that?”

“You and your crew of naïve miscreants are almost directly underneath the Katla volcano in Iceland. How far down you are, I have not yet ascertained. But I would imagine that you are quite close to the magma reservoirs, and in imminent danger of tapping them with your tunnel. Other criminal crews spaced all around the volcano are in similar positions. May I remind you that whenever Katla has gone off in the past—the last time was in 1918—it discharged as much toxic substances per second as the combined fluid discharges of the Amazon, Mississippi, Nile, and Yangtze rivers.”

Holy shit! Could he be right? My voice quivered a little, even though I tried to control it. “And why would we be in such a place?”

“Because Los Braceros Últimos plan to unleash the Pinatubo Option.”

Now I started to *really* get scared.

Every school kid from first grade on knew about the Pinatubo Option, named after a famous volcanic incident of the last century. It was a geoengineering scheme of the highest magnitude, intended to flood the atmosphere with ash and other aerosols so as to cut global temperatures by a considerable fraction. Consensus wisdom had always figured it was too risky and uncontrollable a proposition.

“I cannot let you and your friends proceed with this. You must tell them to halt immediately.”

For a minute, I had almost felt myself on Benno’s side. But when he gave me that order in his know-it-all way, I instantly rebelled. All the years of growing up together, with him always the favored one, stuck in my throat.

“Like hell! We’re just doing what’s good for the planet in the fastest way possible. Los Braceros must have studied everything better than you. You’re just a kid like me!”

Benno looked at me calmly with his stoney face. “I am a Master Class Steward, and you are not.”

“Well, Mr. Master Class Steward, try and stop me!”

I started to climb to my feet when Benno tackled me and knocked me back down!

We began to wrestle. I expected to pin Benno in a couple of seconds. But that wasn’t how things went.

I had always believed my brother was a total lardass from all his FarmEarth physical inactivity. How the heck was I supposed to know that he spent two hours every weekend in some kind of martial arts training? Was I in charge of his frigging schedule? We didn’t even share the same mito-Mom!

I found myself snaffled up in about half a minute, with Benno clamping both my wrists together behind my back with just one big strong hand.

And then, with the other hand, he rawly popped out my memtax, being none too gentle.

I felt blinded! Awake, yet separated from augie space for more than the short interval it takes to swap in fresh memtax, I couldn’t access the world’s knowledge, talk to my friends, or even recall what I had had for breakfast that morning.

Next Benno stripped me of my haptic bling. Then he said, “You wait right here.”

He left, locking the bedroom door behind him.

I sat on the bed, feeling empty and broken. I couldn’t even tell you now how much time passed.

The door opened and in walked Benno, followed by his mito-Mom, Zoysia van Vollenhoven.

Aunt Zoysia always inspired instant guilt in me. Not because of anything she said or did, or any overbearing, sneering attitude, but only because of the way she looked.

Aunt Zoysia was the sexiest female I knew—and not in any kind of bulimic high-fashion designer-label manner either, like those thoroughbreds the Brazillians engineer for the runways of the world. I always thought that if Gaia could have chosen to incarnate herself, she would have looked just like Aunt Zoysia, all overflowing breasts and hips and wild mane of hair, lush wide mouth, proud nose and piercing eyes. She practically radiated exuberant joy and heartiness and sensuality. In her presence, I always got an incipient stiffy, and since she was family—even though she and I shared no genes—the stiffy was always instantly accompanied by guilt.

But this was the one time I didn’t react in the usual manner, I felt so miserable.

Aunt Zoysia came over and sat on the mattress beside me and hugged me. Even those intimate circumstances did not stir up any horniness.

“Crispian, dear, Benno has described to me the trouble you’ve gotten into. It’s all right, I completely understand. You just wanted to play with the big boys. But now, I think you’ll admit, things have gone too far, and must be brought to a screeching halt. Benno?”

“Yes, mother?”

“Please find a fresh pair of memtax for your brother. We will slave Crispian’s to ours, and bring him along for the shutdown of Los Braceros Últimos. It will be highly instructional.”

Benno went out and came back with new memtax in their organic blister pack. I wetted them and inserted them, and put on my restored haptic bling. I booted up all my apps, but still found myself a volitionless spectator to the shared augie space feed from Zoysia and Benno.

“All right, son, let’s take these sneaky bastards down.”

“Ready when you are, Mom.”

You know, I thought I was pretty slick with my Master Class privileges, could handle effectuators and the flora and fauna of various biomes pretty deftly. But riding Zoysia’s feed, I realized I knew squat.

The first thing she and Benno did was to go into God Mode, with Noclip Option, Maphack, Duping and Smurfing thrown in. That much I could follow—barely.

But after that, I was just along for the dizzying ride.

Zoysia and Benno took down Los Braceros Últimos like a military sonic cannon disabling a pack of kittens. Racing around the globe in augie space, they undercut all the many plans of the Pinatubo-heads, disabling rogue effectuators and even using legal machines in off-label ways, such as to immobilize people in meatspace. I think the wildest maneuver though was when they stampeded a herd of springboks through the remote Windhoek encampment where some of the conspirators were operating from. The eco-agitators never knew what hit them.

The whole roundup lasted barely an hour. I found myself back in my familiar and yet somehow strange-seeming bedroom, actually short of breath and sweaty. Zoysia and brother Benno were unruffled.

“Now, Crispian,” said my Aunt sweetly, no sign of the moderate outlaw blood she had spilled evident on her perfect teeth or nails, “I hope you’ve learned that privileges only come to those who have earned them, and know how to use them.”

“Yes’m.”

“Perhaps if you hung out a little more with your brother, and consented to allow him to mentor you….”

I turned to glare at Benno, but his homely, unaggressive expression defused my usual impatience and dislike. Plus, I was frankly a little frightened of him now.

“Yes’m.”

“Very well. I think then, in a few years, given the rare initiative and skills you’ve shown—even though you chose to follow an illegal path with them—you should be quite ready to join us in ensuring that people do not abuse FarmEarth.”

And of course, as I’ve often said to Anuta, wise and sexy Aunt Zoysia predicted everything just right.

Which is why I have to say goodbye now.
Something somewhere on FarmEarth is *wrong*!…

ANGELMAKERS

Snow sugared thickly the steeply sloping winter-dead lawn behind the great organically sprawling autonohouse, a white canvas scribbled over with small oblate bootprints and the sharp parallel tracks of sled blades, as well as the shallow worm furrows of lofter saucers. At regular intervals, black-leaved trees with precisely choreographed branches sucked every impinging photon from a December sun pale as a circle of overwashed bleached cotton pegged at the zenith.

Around the house, no activity save routine maintenance and materials-acquisition manifested itself. The house's adults remained busy inside at their ludic labors. Human presence in the landscape consisted of a still line of a dozen children by the edge of the broad frozen river that demarcated the extensive lawn's lower edge. The children on the shore flanked a set of runner tracks that extended onto the ice and terminated at a jagged hole filled with water as coarse and grey as steel wool.

The children wore colorful jellied unisuits thin as pressed-fruit strips, revealing the unisex lines of their pre-adolescent bodies. Their warmly rosy hands appeared bare, save for outlines of shivering air. Perched on their heads, upright or askew, squishy caps exhibited the silly geometries of mirror worlds. Holding their sleds and saucers, or standing beside them, the children silently contemplated the ice-surfaced river and its anomalous disfiguration.

A gentle-looking boy spoke. "She's been under some time now. A minute almost. There are snags down there, I know."

His statement elicited some nervous shuffling and visible expressions of empathy from his peers, except for one rough lad who taunted, "If you don't trust the angels, Rand, dive in yourself."

An exceedingly thin and nervous-looking girl said, "Maybe we should. Or maybe we should call Fabiola's parents." She fingered the rim of the ceramic communion wafer bonded to her wrist without touching its responsive surfaces. "What if the angels are too busy elsewhere?"

"Have you ever known the leucotheans to fail, Shelly?" demanded the second boy.

"No, but I feel so *helpless* just standing here. I want to *do something*."

“Fabiola won’t thank you if you spoil the story of her drowning by horning in on things.”

The boy named Rand said defensively, “Are you saying Fabiola planned this, Brewster?”

Brewster made a dismissive wave. “Of course not. Who’d be that daft? But now that it’s happened—”

At that moment another child shouted, “Look!” The crowd followed the sentry’s outstretched finger with their massed gaze.

As if from directly out of the consumptive sun, a silhouetted figure had detached itself. Swelling from antlike dot to doll-like cutout to human-scaled apparition as it dropped lower, the angel was swiftly upon them. Without hesitation, the angel plunged through the hole in the ice, sending a geyser of cold water upward, droplets bespattering the children. Too thrilled to care, they gave an instinctive collective shout of excitement and relief.

Within seconds the angel emerged from the jagged-edge opening, bearing an unconscious child. Skimming low, the angel landed amidst the children, set the body of Fabiola down in the snow, and kneeled beside the bare-headed blonde girl with the gelid blue face.

Unhesitatingly, the children formed a tight clot around the tableau of kneeling angel and child. Closest by an inch or two, the girl named Shelly peered intensely, her concentration fixed more on the angel than on her unbreathing friend.

The wingless angel was whiter than the ambient snow: platinum hair, ivory limbs. The angelic body displayed no sex, although the angel was completely unclothed. The face of the angel was composed in neutral lines from which perhaps only a depthless sadness, if any emotion whatsoever, could be teased. The angel’s eyes were featureless marbles, spheres seemingly composed of polished bone set in the ocular orbits.

The angel kneeled beside Fabiola, but applied no conventional mode of resuscitation. Instead, one arm and hand attentuated ectoplasmically, then snaked through Fabiola’s mouth and, apparently, down the girl’s throat. The angel’s other rarefied hand plunged into the child’s chest over her heart like fog through cheesecloth.

Fabiola’s body instantly arced like the tensioned arm of a loaded catapult, head and heels digging into the snow. The stolid angel remained seemingly unmoved, but withdrew those intrusive extensions, which resumed

humaniform solidity. Fabiola spewed river water, gagged, then sucked in a shuddering breath, while the angel ran soothing hands up the girl's frame, ending with hands clasping the girl's head on either side.

Fabiola's eyes snapped open. Her gaze locked with the angel's blank fixity. At the same time Shelly strained forward, as if she were a bob on an invisible elastic line connecting victim and rescuer. The tableau held for a few eternal seconds, then shattered as the angel let the snowy depression again receive Fabiola's head. Somehow the angel leaped directly from a kneeling posture into the sky.

Fabiola sat up weakly; both Rand and Brewster moved to support her, and the other children clustered closer to hear the first words from their revivified peer, a weak "I've come back."

All except Shelly. Shading her eyes, the wan girl watched the angel until that never-speaking being had long disappeared.

* * * *

In coupling class, Rand and Fabiola lay sated on mussed white sheets draping a low carnalounge. Fabiola's newly mature body had developed along her chosen lines of feminine curvature. Rand's form likewise had fructified into a desirably ripe, slim-hipped maleness. Together, langorous limbs entangled, they resembled one of the three-hundred-year-old Bouguereaus they had studied last quintmester in art-history class. In ranks across the copulatorium, other couched couples replicated their easy indolence.

Adjacent to Fabiola and Rand on their own divan, Shelly and Brewster were lone exceptions to the class's ruling somatopsychic fulfillment. Brewster, his innate truculence now compounded by an overdeveloped physique, rested on his back, a frown dragging his face down, arms folded across his inordinately hairy chest. Her slim lily of a body the least mature among her classmates, Shelly reclined on her side, spine convexed toward her partner, arms bowed over her head. Now Brewster spoke more loudly than was deemed polite within the copulatorium. Rand and Fabiola could not help overhearing.

"Damn it, girl. A little enthusiasm wouldn't be out of place."

A soft "I'm sorry" wisped out from the cage of Shelly's arms like an escaping ghost.

Rand was not placated. “Sorry won’t cut it anymore. Why, if you were my only partner, I’d have a knot the size of houseroot in my libido.” The burly youth swung his feet to the floor and stepped over to the neighboring lounge. “On your way, Rand. I’m cutting in.”

Both Fabiola and Rand graciously consented. Her spill of golden hair whispering on the sheets, the lush Fabiola accepted the impetuous Brewster into her embrace, while Rand slipped onto the couch where Shelly still cringed. As Fabiola and Brewster began to engage, Rand slid a comforting arm around Shelly’s shoulder. She spun about and relaxed into the offered cradle of his shoulder and chest, pressing her face against him.

“Want to talk about anything?” asked Rand quietly. “Something special bothering you?”

“I just worry all the time, Rand. I can’t explain it, but it interferes with everything, not just sex.”

“What concerns you? Your future? It’s perfectly natural for young people our age to be a little worried about exactly what playwork we’ll eventually choose.”

“No, it’s not my personal future. I’m fairly clear about that. I want to be a theresan.”

Rand forebore to comment on this rather unconventional choice. “What then?”

Shelly gripped Rand’s waist tightly. “I—I worry about the people I care for. Their health, their safety—their lives. It’s all I can think about, ever since—ever since Fabiola drowned.”

For several seconds, Rand said nothing. Then: “But that was five years ago, Shelly.”

“You needn’t remind me! I’ve lived every hellish preoccupied minute of it!”

“Well, it’s just—don’t you think you should seek a detangling?”

“If I remain knotted much longer, I will. But I just want to puzzle it out by myself for a while yet.”

“It’s so odd, though.” Rand sounded genuinely perplexed. “To have such an archaic fear in this age of angels.”

At the mention of angels, Shelly stiffened. “They’re the problem. They make our mortality more real at the same time they guard us from accidents. We’ve all come to rely on them so much, that we’ve lost a lot of

old instincts of self-preservation. What if their perfection is flawed? Considering where they come from—‘such base and hybrid clay.’”

Rand balked at entering that seldom-trodden territory, the origin of the angels, and swerved instead into literary criticism. “You’re quoting Athanor. He’s not to my taste.”

Beside them, Fabiola and Brewster were noisily climaxing. The communion wafer on Fabiola’s dangling wrist clacked rhythmically against the tiled floor. Rand found himself aroused. Upon Shelly’s shy acknowledgement of his condition, he began to caress her. Quickly, they started to move together.

Their formal evaluation at the end of class cited as a demerit only Shelly’s postcoital tears.

* * * *

Alternately steamy and chill, cleansing mists billowed from the wallpores of the dimly lit freeform sauna. Subtle restorative natural fragrances and amygdaloids rode the droplets: balsam, vanilla, altozest. Self-segregating instinctively by sex, boys and girls clustered mostly in separate grottoes, as if after the intimacies of coupling class certain male and female intrabonding required reinforcing. Giggles and laughter interspersed boisterous talk.

Seated on the absorptive floor, Shelly braced her back against a pliable wall, drew her knees up to her chin and crossed her ankles in front of her sex. She made no move to join in any of the conversations around her. She passed most of the sauna session in contemplative silence, until Fabiola approached her. The smiling blonde girl dropped down gracefully beside the somber dark-haired one. Shelly’s tentative expression mixed a faint welcome with a nearly palpable disinclination to talk. Fabiola ignored the look.

“I hear you’ve decided on a career,” said Fabiola.

Visibly surprised, Shelly answered, “Why, yes, I have.”

Fabiola paused, then said, “Being a theresan seems an awfully—well, a harsh and stringent path.”

Shelly’s face now expressed an indignation matched by her tone. “How can you say that? Devoting yourself entirely to the spiritual welfare of others? It’s the most fulfilling career I can imagine.”

“But the libido-dampers, the vow of minimal consumption—it all seems so purposelessly self-denying in the face of our abundance.”

“Maybe so. Maybe people nowadays have all the sex and food and toys they need. But there’s still suffering. Death and mortal dissatisfaction resist all unknotting. The vows are real, but also symbolic. They focus our attention, help us concentrate on our mission of relieving pain. The theresans are only one step below the angels themselves.”

Fabiola evinced nervousness at such a comparison. “Well, I won’t pretend you aren’t suited for such a life, Shel. Ever since we were little, you’ve inclined that way.”

Shelly neither affirmed nor denied this characterization. Suffused in soothing veils of moisture, the friends rested wordlessly side by side for a minute. Then Fabiola spoke.

“Don’t you want to know what I’ve chosen for my playwork?”

Shelly brightened. “Of course. I hadn’t realized you’d decided yet.”

“I’m majoring in exobiological research, specializing in Leucothean lifeforms with a concentration on hybridology.”

“Will you have to go discontinuous to visit Leucothea?”

“Of course, if I choose to travel at all, which I probably will. How else would I cross all those lightyears?”

Shelly shuddered. “I could never put myself through such an experience, even if it *is* temporary. Losing your body that way—”

Fabiola laughed off her friend’s apprehensions. “It’s perfectly safe. Just a matter of not being where you were for a while until the universe is tickled into agreeing you’re ready to be elsewhere.” Changing the subject, Fabiola asked, “Who do you like better, Rand or Brewster?”

A look of bemused consternation squalled across Shelly’s features. “Rand is so kind to me. There’s no denying that, or his charm. But Brewster has something that pulls at me, a demanding quality that’s almost frightening.”

“You should be nicer to him then. More appreciative.”

“I try. But I get distracted too often.” Shelly bit her underlip. “Fabiola—do you ever recall your death?”

Fabiola laughed easily. “My death? I’m right here beside you! How could I have ever died?”

“But you did. You drowned. Your heart was stopped until the angel restarted it.”

Ignoring Shelly’s speech, Fabiola fluffed up her abundant damp curls. “The sauna always butchers my hair! I’m definitely going to speak to the mockie-proctors about altering the proteinoid mix in the final rinse.”

* * * *

From across the form-strewn chamber, as if across a vision of some steam-cloaked afterlife, a desultory Elysian Fields, Brewster and Rand more or less discreetly watched the two girls. In relaxed fashion, Rand stood leaning against a wall, arms folded across his hairless chest; contrarily, Brewster twisted energetically from the waist up in an exaggerated display of calisthentics, snapping his limbs about.

“Gaia!” exclaimed Brewster. “Fabiola gets me so primed! Look at her breasts arch as she primps her hair! What a kick.”

Rand’s tone was dry. “You two certainly seemed on the same protocol in class. Do you expect to see much of her after graduation?”

Brewster ceased swivelling and began to trot in place, coincident with a blast of cold. “Not likely. The one drawback with Fab from my point of view is her excessive brains. She’s off for more schooling, which is certainly not the case with me.”

Rand straightened away from the wall, plainly intrigued. “Oh? This is news. I had no idea your future plans were so solid. Tell all, please.”

“I’ve already signed on with the Rewilderness Institute. They promised me my choice of assignment after a short training stint. I’m leaning toward the Sacramento Rainforest.”

“A noble mission.”

“Noble my prickly arse! I just can’t stand being cooped up in these prissy modern safety zones any more. I want to be surrounded by some wildness, to use my muscles more than my head.”

“Engineered wildness. And of course the angels will still be watching over you and your mates.”

Brewster snorted like a guard minotaur. “Don’t remind me. There’s no place free from their intrusive ways. The damn seraphian layer girdles the whole globe like a straitjacket, put into place long before our generation had a say in it.”

Rand smiled. “An interesting comparison. Most people compare the turbulent home of our angel friends to a vital safety net.”

“Most people are lazy, complacent fools. A warm autonohome, uninterrupted entertainment, and the cackle of the flock. That’s enough to make them happy.”

“Cheep, cheep.”

Brewster stopped jogging. “Be fair now, you know I don’t mean you. You’re a good friend, Rand. You and me, Fabiola and Shelly—we have some kind of special bond among us. I predict we’ll always hang together somehow.”

“Sentimentality *and* a nod toward the future. This must be that ‘maturity’ I’ve heard so much about.”

“Joke all you want, dummy. And by the way, I haven’t learned *your* plans yet. Maybe you and Fabiola have some kind of zingy co-hab agreement.”

“Not at all. But we *are* going to the same school next year.”

“A-ha! Don’t tell me you’re going to muck about with squirmy aliens too.”

“No. Not unless you count Jovian volatiles as such.”

Brewster shouted his approval and slapped Rand on the back hard enough to cause the slighter boy to stagger a step. “So it’s to be mining after all! Congratulations! And you let me rave on about my shirt-pocket wilderness! Out among the stars, there’s the real frontier.”

Rand spoke modestly. “Oh, most of the work is done from Earth via d-links. And on-site autonoclaques handle much of the rest. I doubt I’ll find myself in space more than a few times a year.”

“More than most of the rest of us. Well, if it weren’t for needing to feel the wind on my face, Rand, I’d join you in a minute.”

Rand quoted their secular scripture only half-archly: “‘Each seeker his own guide.’”

Brewster delivered the expected well-circulated parody: “‘Each thrillseeker his own androgyne.’”

* * * *

The roof of the school was generally off-limits. Its attractions were minimal—a perch from which to pelt innocent passersby with popbeads from the pepper trees, a generous view of the landscaped community and the river where Fabiola had nearly met her end—and consequently, so was any tempation to trespass. But this evening, with the end of the official

commencement celebrations at midnight, the lure of the forbidden drew some dozen graduates unwilling to call an end to their revelry.

Rand concentrated on jiggering the school's heuristics, chattering at the building in high-level autonopidgin. At his back, his festively dressed companions shuffled and whispered. Tristan and Alana, a pair of lovers bound for the Black Gang, kissed with professional abandon. A fellow named Ewen let out a fart, saying, "Let the school parse that!"

Rand worked intently despite the distractions. "Damn stubborn mockie—There! We're in."

Everyone gave a cheer then, heedless of discovery. All the young men and women exhibited varying degrees of amygdaloid intoxication—nothing illegal, but more than was perhaps wise of the permitted stuff. Half the intruders raced up the stairs, vieing with those in the lofter shaft to be first; the two factions burst out onto the node-studded roof almost simultaneously. Above, a wealth of stars prickled. June breezes carried the scents of water and grass. The happy trespassers rushed to the low parapet edging the roof, the only real focus of the scene. Some ten meters below, the well-lighted town slept.

Rand encircled Fabiola's bare midriff with his left arm. She pressed her hip against him. Brewster and Shelly stood rather stiffly side by side, although holding hands. Squirts full of wine circulated; by the time one reached Brewster, its overused muscles, at the ebb of their refreshing cycle, refused to work, and only a couple of drops escaped the living valve. Brewster threw the squirt down squishily in exaggerated disgust.

"Bah! Who needs alcohol on a night like tonight? Just to be free of this dump forever is intoxicating enough!"

Releasing Shelly's hand, Brewter leaped atop the parapet and began to dance like a marionette proxied by someone being tickled to death. Everyone cheered and applauded except Shelly. Even in the dim starlight and backscattered radiance of the street illuminants her expression of alarm shone like a young moon.

"No, Brewster! It's dangerous! Come down!"

As if his imaginary strings had been dipped in liquid nitrogen, Brewster instantly froze. He stared meanly at Shelly for a few interminable seconds, then said, "You don't own me, Shel. And there is no danger anywhere anymore."

With those words, he hurled himself backwards off the roof.

Shelly screamed, as did several others, not including Rand or Fabiola. Craning forward, the young men and women watched Brewster plummet.

Halfway in his swift fall, an angel materialized beneath him. The alabaster being caught Brewster easily and lowered him safely to the ground.

Rand spoke precisely, in the parodic tones of a lecturer, but failed entirely to mask deeper feelings. “Unlike our long-range, machine-based d-links, the angels of course can go discontinuous organically and at will. However, the energy-burden such actions place on them limit them to one or at the most two ionosphere-to-troposphere jumps between downtimes back in the seraphian layer—”

His humorous pedanticism went disregarded, as his peers clambered to the parapet and jumped in squealing imitation of Brewster. Each of course met midair rescue. The flock of enigma-faced marmoreal angels flew away conventionally as each jumper was grounded. Finally, only Shelly, Rand and Fabiola remained on the roof. Rand exhibited a cool disdain, while Fabiola’s eyes shone with an aloof excitement. Shelly, though, quivered with rage and the aftermath of her fear.

Rand moved to embrace her, saying, “Juvenile behavior, of course—really wasteful of seraphian resources—but you have to make some allowances —”

Shelly bucked out of his offered consoling clutches. “I hate him! I hate you all!” She raced off down the stairs, out the school and down the streets.

Fabiola watched her go, then said, “Hardly the proper attitude for the start of her career as a martyr.”

* * * *

Fabiola’s office-cum-playlab occupied a congeries of expandable Hoberman spheres in the middle of Los Angeles, conveniently close to the main So-Cal d-link offworld transit center. Currently, the complex swelled half-again as large as it nearest neighbor: the Leucothean Institute had mounted a new expedition recently to underexplored regions of the distant world whence came the objects of Fabiola’s researches.

When the building announced a visitor that morning, Fabiola paused abruptly in the middle of her work as if the significant yet unexpected name had jarred her concentration.

“Send her up.”

Waiting for the arrival of her visitor, Fabiola closed down the experiment she had been working on that morning. Tapping stacatto codes into her communion wafer with her stylus nail, she induced quiescence in the leucotherarium inhabitants. Behind the glass walls of the sealed alien environment, amorphous shapes, their metabolisms damped, pooled on their moss-furred cage floor like heaps of coddled egg-whites.

Fabiola stepped from playlab to outer office. She entered just in time to greet her visitor.

Shelly appeared thinner than when Fabiola had last seen her childhood friend. Under the libido-blockers, her body seemed to have devolved to pre-adolescence wispiness, as if time’s arrow had reversed for her alone. A cloud of anxiety fogged her features.

Fabiola swiftly and heartily embraced her friend. “What a pleasant surprise, Shel! It’s been what, three years? Here, take a seat.”

Unresponsive to Fabiola’s pleasantries, Shelly collapsed into a chair. “I’ve been dropped from the theresans, Fabiola. Me and hundreds of others.”

“Oh, that’s awful! But why?”

“Reduced call for our services. A happier world needs fewer empathetic companions—or so people delude themselves into thinking. Dealing with the shrinkage, the order has applied a strict ‘last in, first out’ policy. Frankly, I’m surprised the axe didn’t fall on me last year at this time.”

Taking a seat beside Shelly, Fabiola grasped her hand. “I’m so sorry. What will you do now?”

Shelly pinned Fabiola with the intensity of her gaze. “I can’t simply abandon my calling, just because I’ve lost institutional support. But I can’t continue on my own either. So I’ve applied to the angelmakers. The demand for *their* services, at least, is still strong.”

Fabiola’s face registered baffled incredulity. “I don’t understand.”

“How much more clearly can I say it? I’ve put my name in to become an angel.”

Clearly agitated, Fabiola stood up. “Along with criminals and the incorrigibly suicidal? You’re neither of those, are you, Shelly? How could you do such a thing?”

Grimly thinning her lips, Shelly countered, “Every year a few sane and responsible individuals make the same choice. It’s not unprecedented.”

Fabiola began to pace. “This news upsets me terribly. You’re throwing your individuality away. And for what?”

“If I can’t save people’s souls, at least I can still safeguard their bodies. That’s all they seem to care about anyway.”

Growing more distressed, Fabiola asked, “Why are you telling me all this? It’s an incredible burden! I almost wish you had just vanished.”

Shelly smiled for the first time. “You think mere knowledge of my choice is a burden? Well, I’m about to ask for much more. I want you and Rand and Brewster to be present at the transformation. It’s my privilege to have three witnesses.”

Color bled from Fabiola’s face. “Witness it? I—I can’t!”

“Why not? You deal with leucothean lifeforms every day.”

“But not hybrids!”

Shelly got up awkwardly from her seat. “Too bad your sensibilities are so refined, dear. I enjoin you to be there, and I know you won’t refuse. I assume you’re still in contact with the men.”

“Yes, of course. I saw both of them just last month.”

“I expect to find you all there then. I’ll send the particulars as soon as I learn them.”

Shelly moved toward the door. Automatically, Fabiola accompanied her. At the door, Shelly turned, gripped Fabiola by her upper arms, and brought her face to within inches of the other woman’s.

“You’ve often claimed you loved me, Fab. Prove it now.”

Shelly kissed Fabiola fiercely, released her, and left.

Fabiola wiped her lips as if they burned.

* * * *

Sealed from outside contamination—or interior escape—the operating theater was staffed only by sophisticated mechanisms, partly autonomous, partly telefactored by the hidden, anonymous cadre of angelmakers. Now alertly inactive, the mobile surgical units awaited their initiating commands. The sole human inhabitant of the theater lay naked upon a comfortable monitor-and-assist platform. As yet untouched, Shelly’s thin pale body—stark ribs, hairless mons, composed expression—seemed already well on its way to angelhood. Arms resting laxly along her sides, she stared upward with concentrated fixity.

Beside the patient an opaque sealed canister sat in isolation from the other equipment, a grail-like focus of vision for the assembled watchers.

The ceiling of the lighted theater was transparent. Beyond this barrier, in cloaking darkness and ringing the edge of the theater, seats with full non-interventionist telemetry held medical students, professors, and Shelly's three witnesses. Fabiola was flanked by her two friends. Rand, to her left, held her hand. On her other side, Brewster sat with arms folded like logs across his chest. Rand's expressive face revealed an inner tumult mixing fascination, dismay and a sorrowful nostalgia. Fabiola's countence expressed pure despair. Brewster exhibited an angry scowl, as if personally affronted. Amidst the murmurous audience, his sudden exclamation registered as an egregious slap.

"Damn her! She's deserting us! Is she really that weak?"

"'That weak?'" Rand repeated. "Why not 'that strong?' Could you undergo such a transformation?"

"Why not ask if I could have my legs sawed off for no good reason? It's not bravery in either case, just masochistic stupidity."

Fabiola's voice was pitched higher than normal. "Will you two just shut up! Show some respect for Shelly's committment. Please."

Brewster opened his mouth to reply, then obviously thought better of such a move. He braced his implacable arms more firmly. Rand squeezed Fabiola's hand more tightly and pecked her brow with a kiss, but she seemed to esteem his solictious affection no more highly than she did Brewster's truculence.

The machines in the theater suddenly stirred to life. Ignoring the offered close-up telemetry, Fabiola bent forward, as if only unmediated vision across the shortest possible distance could sanctify this transaction. Unwittingly, Rand and Brewster mimicked her.

Below, Shelly had already received a local sensory block across her sternum that still left her completely conscious. Surely her light-swamped eyes could not discern any of the watchers above, yet her expectant gaze seemed locked on theirs. Now clamps and blood-flow inhibitors came into play, as a small incision was lasered into her side, revealing the common human scarlet wetness.

As if unable to interpose a censor between his thoughts and his speech, Rand whispered, "Buddhists claim Shakyamuni was born of such a wound

in his mother’s side. But Christians honor the piercing of a spear in the torso of a crucified Jesus.”

The sealed canister now resided in a mechanical grip. Obedient to the application of a security code, the canister top began to unscrew itself, as if its living contents sought egress on their own. The spatulate limb of a mechanical poised itself above the lid, ready to cap the vessel. When the lid had fully disengaged and the spatulate blocker had slid into place, the container was brought nearly into contact with Shelly’s incision. Then the intervening shield-hand withdrew.

The observers saw in the tiny slice of space between the vessel and the body the merest suggestion of a sentient pulsing gelatinous influx. Quickly, the container was pulled away, while at the same time a transparent shell rose up from within the M&A platform to fully enclose the patient.

Beneath this perspex carapace, Shelly began instantly to metamorphose.

The lips of her incision drew closed of their own volition. Her stomach swelled noticeably, then just as significantly concaved, as the leucothean lifeform introduced into her abdomen swiftly absorbed organs, bloated, then shrunk into extensions that blew through her like a wind of pure somatic change. The expression on Shelly’s face betokened no pain, just shock, and then, amazingly, a species of bliss. Her eyes rolled back into their sockets; when they revolved again a full minute later, they revealed themselves transmuted into the flinty optic roundels of all angels. Attenuating and wavering, her limbs went through various test modes of ectoplasmic configuration before settling down to the angelic perfection of human similitude.

Most astonishingly, Shelly’s body began to float above the M&S pedestal, constrained only by the clear lid.

Above, in the observation galley, Fabiola began to retch. Brewster struck the dome of the theater a resounding blow. Rand sought tranquility in dull recitation of facts.

“The imago will automatically seek the global seraphian layer and the company of its kind. The canopy prevents its flight until it can be brought into the open. Already the new angel is part of the leucothean group mentation, able to detect and respond to human distress in all its forms via contact with our wafers along non-local dimensions—”

Fabiola turned and slapped Rand's face. Brewster restrained her from further assault, but needlessly, for she slumped into her seat in tears.

Rand massaged his rubescent cheek. "Such a simple operation in theory, but fraught with more than its share of emotional complications."

* * * *

Rand beneath her, Brewster above, Fabiola performed slow gyrations upon the twin fleshy impalements of their cocks thickening inside her. Brewster had his inner elbows locked beneath her axillaries, hands clamped behind her neck; Rand cupped her pendulous breasts. Entrained in lubricious synchronous routines, the threesome resembled in their fluid unity some tripartite hybrid not entirely dissimilar to the dualistic being which had come into life just hours ago in the surgical theater beneath their rapt gaze.

The trio's movements accelerated with their growing urge toward completion. Inter-responsive sounds escaped the participants: from Fabiola, a cascade of panting mewls; from Brewster, coarse-grained grunts; from Rand, soothing wordless encouragements. Within speedy minutes, their orgasms spilled over the barrier separating potential from actualized, guttural howls an operatic accompaniment to the release. Brewster slumped sideways over onto the mattress, pulling Fabiola with him and thus levering Rand onto his side: six legs tangled like the limp fronds of sea plants.

For a time, until they regained an ease of breathing, they did not speak. Then Brewster broke the silence.

"I should have been kinder to her. I see that now. But I was an ignorant brute."

Unlinked from her lovers, Fabiola rolled over onto her back, pulling the men into a cradling embrace on either side. She said, "Kinder? Perhaps. But I doubt that any of us could have dissuaded Shelly."

Brewster growled. "Of course, I blame the angelmakers too. They should have refused her as an unstable volunteer."

"What other kind would they ever get?" Rand wryly asked.

Fabiola suddenly said, "No one's innocent. We're all angelmakers."

Brewster rose up on one elbow, glaring. "What?"

"I mean that the four of us had a unique dynamic that drove Shelly to her fate. And also that our society as a whole demanded her transformation. We

planted a slow virus of ideation within her during childhood, and it finally came awake and transcribed itself."

Brewster dropped back down. "I don't know if I buy that, Fab."

"It's true nonetheless."

Rand's voice held a genuine perplexity. "Do you remember, Brew, something you said years ago, when we were still in school? That the four of us made a whole? Why don't I feel a missing part now?"

"I suppose because Shelly's still out there in some form."

Fabiola volunteered, "The findings are still imprecise regarding how much individual mentation remains after hybridization."

Rand shuddered. "Not much I hope."

Brewster sat up suddenly, as if struck by inspiration. "Let's memorialize this day. I propose that every year on the anniversary of Shelly's ascension, we spend a holiday together."

"I second the motion," said Rand.

Fabiola gripped both their hands. "It's unanimous. In memory of Shelly, a school reunion each year."

Brewster wedged his big hand into her wet crotch, enfolding her whole sex back to her anus. "And you'll be our homecoming queen."

"And you the jester," suggested Rand.

They all laughed before they all kissed.

* * * *

Brewster seemed as proud of the Sacramento Rainforest as if he himself had planted each of its towering black-leaved trees, artfully draped each of its sensate lianas, animated each of its animals, programmed each of its buzzing bugs. Conducting Fabiola and Rand down one of the region's many public trails, hot sunlight butterscotching their bare arms, he lectured in an earnest manner most unlike his bluff self outside this artificial wilderness, delivering anecdotes, statistics and philosophy.

"You'd never believe you were walking through what was once a metropolitan concentration, now would you? Just carting away the demolition debris to the plasma incinerators took the better part of a decade. But currently you won't find more than a few score people at any given time within a hundred-mile radius. A handful of daytrippers, some hikers

and overnight campers, and a smattering of guides such as myself. One minute.”

Brewster had halted by a tree with a diseased limb. He bent to its base and began scraping away dead leaves from around the trunk. After a few swipes, he exposed the tree’s inset partner to the communion wafer in his wrist. Mating his wafer to the wood-rimmed one, Brewster internalized the feed, then stood.

“Nothing out of the ordinary. Just planned rot.”

Rand effortlessly shrugged off his bulky pack, revealing a patch of sweaty shirt fabric beneath. “Lofters may have solved the weight problem, but I’ve yet to wear a pack that truly breathes.”

Fabiola chimed in with her own complaint. “My feet are absolutely aching. How much farther, Brew?”

“Just a mile or so. I swear, you two youngsters should apply for early systemic reboots. I had a couple of ’booters in here last week—ninety years old if they were a day—and they didn’t chaff me as much as you two.”

Rand pulled his pack on again with an exaggerated show of self-sacrifice. “Can we help it if desk-play has made me and Fab soft? We can’t all spend every day slogging through the muck and mire like you do. Some of us have a civilization to run.”

Brewster snorted. “Poking alien slimebags in cages in one case, and guiding giant gasbags into orbit in the other. Such noble pursuits. Let’s go, and no more bitching.”

Brewster’s “mile or so” proved closer to five. But the sight at the end proved inspiring: a luxuriant greensward rolling at a slight inclination toward a posted but unbarricaded cliff edge.

Brewster tapped his wafer with quick codes. “I’ll shut off the warnings from those posts while we’re here. I think we’re all mature enough not to tumble over the edge.”

Shucking their packs onto the lawn, the three friends strolled toward the land’s edge. Attaining this stanchion-dotted terminus, they saw the boulder-studded Sacramento River churning turbulently some fifty feet below, a muddy snake writhing in digestion, death or birth.

“The Rewilderness Institute has upped the flow for rafting season. If you two could have spared me more than a single day—”

“But we couldn’t,” said Fabiola decisively. “So let’s enjoy our picnic and not spoil it with ‘might have beens.’”

They retreated several yards from the dropoff and began to spread a feast from the contents of their packs. Soon, a large blanket played host to a dozen dishes, hot and cold. Rand popped the cork on a bottle of champagne, and poured portions into the glasses outheld by his companions. After filling his own, he proposed a toast.

“To Shelly, now five years gone, wherever she may be.”

Glasses clinked, and were drained off. Fabiola swiped a finger past the corner of one eye, then smiled and said, “I’m starving. Let’s eat.”

Sprawled laughing on the blanket with his friends, Rand had a chicken leg halfway to his mouth when he froze as if an icicle had replaced his spine. He touched his wafer uselessly. “Oh sweet Gaia…”

The others reacted to his alarm. “What is it, Rand?” “Spill it, boy!”

Rand stood up, his face pale. “It’s a call from my Institute. All off-duty personnel to report immediately. But there’s no point. You’ll learn why any minute yourself.”

The general alert came through to Brewster and Fabiola within seconds. Rand nodded at their dismay.

“Billions of tons of Jovian volatiles on a collision course with the planet. An unprecedented d-link misreception. Estimated area of impact, middle of the North American west coast. Estimated energy release, two point five tunguskas. Estimated time of atmospheric entry, ninety seconds.”

They had no time for any action save throwing themselves to the ground and hugging each other.

A noise like the fabric of spacetime ripping assaulted them. The horizon lit up as if a second sun had been born. A hot wind from a hotter hell arrived, and the ground flapped like a bedsheet hung out in hurricane.

Torn treelimbs whipped past the three people. Ripped apart, the humans themselves rolled toward the cliff edge.

A stanchion caught Fabiola in the gut. Frantically she clawed at it, managing to wrap her arms around it. It tilted out of its socket, but held at a rakish angle.

The shaking earth eventually ceased its convulsions. Warily, Fabiola released her grip on the pole, crawled a few inches away from the cliff, and

stood. She spit an oyster of bright blood, then looked about for Rand and Brewster.

The men were nowhere in sight.

She advanced cautiously but anxiously to the crumbling edge of the greensward. In the river, she thought to discern two bobbing heads and an occasional flailing arm.

Fabiola looked into the sky. “The angels,” she murmured. Then, louder, demandingly, “The angels. Where are the angels?”

She mumbled the answer as soon as it occured to her. “Helping the millions of others hurt in the cities. But surely there’s just one angel free for us.”

She screamed then, a single name.

“Shelly!”

Not discontinuously, but riding the gravitic fluxlines of the planet, an angel swiftly descended. Arrowing for the water, it pulled up short of the surface and did something Fabiola had never seen an angel do.

It hesitated.

“Go!” Fabiola yelled.

The angel dropped like a stone into the torrent. Seconds later, it emerged, grasping a human form like an eagle with its prey. Within moments, the dripping angel and its burden hovered above Fabiola.

An unconscious Brewster dropped a few inches to the earth with a sodden thud.

“I’ll help him! Get Rand! Get Rand!”

The generic angel turned its emotionless iconic countenance to the human woman, then back to Brewster. Ignoring Fabiola’s orders, the angel plunged its resuscitory hands into Brewster’s chest.

Fabiola began beating the angel’s unyielding back. “No, no, I’ll revive him. Help Rand!”

The angel persisted in its fixed course of action. Only when Brewster puked and shudderingly began to breathe unassisted did the angel rise and fly back to the river.

It returned five minutes later with Rand’s corpse.

Fabiola supported Brewster half-sitting; the big man seemed only half-cognizant of his surroundings, stunned by the treachery of his paradise. Fabiola looked up at the floating angel that bore Rand in pieta formality.

Fabiola spoke with a stern sadness. “He’s brain-dead, you fool. There’s nothing you or I can do for him here. Go discontinuous and bring him to a medical center. They might be able to do a neural reweave.”

Instead of obeying, the angel deposited Rand’s body at Fabiola’s feet and scooped up Brewster. They vanished together.

Fabiola stroked Rand’s brow and wept.

“Was that you, Shelly? Was that you? You didn’t wait for me to answer your question. It felt just awful to die beneath the ice. It hurt worse than tongue can tell. But now it hurts much worse to live.”

THE JONES CONTINUUM

Carr tunes the snap generator with exquisite precision. He feels almost like an integrated component of his creation. His nimble fingers nudge the slide controls on the crackle-finished main console up and down, like the delicate digits of a record producer seeking to obtain the proper sound mix for some merry pop melody. Ruby LED displays flicker through an infinity of interdimensional coordinates, before finally being locked onto the proper set. Seemingly relieved, Carr unbends from over the large bank of controls.

Carr and his console occupy the middle of a converted soundstage somewhere in California. This commandeered facility, chosen for reasons of security and subterfuge, is large and desolate-feeling, housing the ghosts of actors, directors and cameramen, and their fictional realities. Carr is suddenly struck by how fitting this setting is, in terms of their attempt to breach an alternate worldline. The huge space traps and alters sound oddly. Carr and his busy crew fill only a small portion of the high-ceilinged building. Cables snake across the cement floor from console to portal to mainframes. Big kliegs on telescoping shafts with tripod feet light the scene harshly. Shadows lurk beyond the perimeter thus defined.

Men and women—dressed like Carr in sexless antiseptic white “bunny-suits,” complete with closefitting hoods—monitor various instruments and convey hushed instructions from one station to another through headphones and pin-mikes. Lurking back in the shadows are a cluster of officers wearing the various uniforms of the U.S. Armed Forces. They are not half so creepily impressive, however, as the assorted plain-clothes observers, who Carr knows represent more secretive and powerful branches of the government.

Carr wipes cold sweat from his brow. So much is riding on this one mission. His reputation, years of hard work, further grants… He’d prefer to be going through the portal himself, but that’s impossible. As the inventor of the snap, he’s too valuable to risk. No, the success of all his efforts ride on the performance of the select team standing nervously by the portal. These four men and one woman have been selected and certified by ranks of government experts. If anyone can deal with the unknown terrain that

lies beyond the portal and establish a beachhead for democracy, it is these five cross-dimensional explorers.

Leaving his console, Carr walks to the group.

Jones is their leader. Solid, responsible Jones, his looks as All-American as his name. Carr finds it odd, how these types always seem to spring up, ready to lead, when the nation needs them. Glenn, Armstrong, and now Jones, another from the same mold. He's a big man, made to appear even taller and bulkier by his outfit. Like the rest of his party, Jones wears, over his desert- camouflage fatigues, segmented plates of Kevlar body-armor, bound to a loose aramid mesh substrate that will allow ventilation in the hot environment they expect to encounter. Combat boots add an inch to Jones' height. Weapons and supplies are strapped across his back and chest, hang from hips and waist. Fragmentation grenades, food concentrates, a canteen, medipak, the latest rapid-fire rifle with laser-sights…

Carr lays a hand on Jones' armored shoulder. "Well, Charles, I guess this is it. There's not much I can say now, except 'Good luck.'"

Jones' voice is firm. "We couldn't ask for a better base team—or mission head, Phil. Just make sure you have the portal open at the right time, and we'll do the rest."

Carr knows he wanted to say a hundred things at this point, but has forgotten every last one in the excitement. All he can remember is a final admonition.

"Remember, we're fairly certain that the physical laws in this universe are different from ours. All the theoretical work indicates there will be a deviation from our own continuum. Nothing major at the quantum level—Planck's Constant and all that crap should be identical to ours down to a few dozen decimal places. But those accumulated small discrepancies may amount to macroscopic differences which we can't predict. You'll have to move cautiously. All we know is that life is possible there. You know all our test animals returned unharmed…"

Skinny Kent interrupts, his voice nervous. "What about those weird results with the higher animals?"

"Right, Tom, right. That monkey and cat did return with initial behavior abnormalities, but those cleared up soon after. We now suspect that most of their atypical behavior derived from sharing the same cage, albeit with a

glass divider. However, just to be sure, you've got your various psychotropic stabilizers. Take them as Doctor Benson advises."

Carr nods to the lone female expedition member. Doctor Benson smiles weakly, her hands fidgeting with the plastic catch that holds her belt of grenades. She squeezes the twin prongs to release the catch, clicks it shut, releases it, clicks it shut, releases—

Suddenly realizing that the sound is mimicking the large snap that will signal their departure, Benson forces her hands to hang laxly by her side.

They are all uneasy, Carr included, and Jones, in his leaderly manner, takes over.

"Let's do it, then."

Carr shakes hands all around. "Charles, Tom, Mike, Heather, George. Our hearts go with you. Oh, yes—the President sends his best wishes too. Well see you back here at oh-nine-hundred on the dot."

Carr heads back to his station. When he turns to face the portal, he sees that the explorers have mounted the steps within the rings. The portal resembles a truncated cornucopia: a series of massive contiguous rings, each one smaller than the one before it. The first and biggest ring stands directly on the floor, while the others are supported on graduated cradles. The expeditionary team is standing single-file within the metal harvest-horn.

Removing a key from his pocket, Carr unlocks a cover to reveal a button. His finger hesitates briefly above it, then plunges down, initiating the launch sequence.

Driven now by an elaborate program running on the Cray-2 CPU'S, the whole process is automatic. The whine of the snap generator increases in frequency and strength. It's almost more than Carr can stand… At last, mercifully, the noise terminates in the eponymous crack—

The annular stage is empty.

Carr looks at his watch.

Two hours till retrieval.

* * * *

The team materializes on a dusty, pebblestrewn, arid patch of desert, standing in a line. The three inner members—Benson, Kent and Blount—immediately drop into crouches. Each has his or her weapon aimed at a

different point of the compass, covering a pre-assigned 120 degrees of fire. Meanwhile, Montreaux at the rear and Jones up front whip microalloyed vanadium-steel poles and hammers from their belt-clips and begin to pound them into the ground. Explosive charges prove unnecessary to split the friable earth, and the poles—which contain homing transmitters and radio-activated flares—are securely in position, marking the locus where the crew must await the re-opening of the transplenary portal.

Only when this crucial task is accomplished does the team relax somewhat. Tle crouching guards stand erect. At a hand-signal from Jones, they sling their rifles over their shoulders. Warily, the men and woman attempt to absorb their surroundings, here in a dimension completely removed from the entire universe of their birth.

They appear to be standing atop a large flat mesa. Beyond this tabletop stretches a landscape of canyons and arroyos, wind-carved buttes and pinnacles, titanic blocks and spires, precarious arches and natural ziggurats, red, yellow, sandy beige, brown and gray. The quiet vista is unbroken by tokens of civilization from horizon to horizon. The air is dry, the sun vibrant. Of animal life there is no sign.

“We might have popped out in a more convenient place,” says Jones. “We certainly won’t be able to get down off this mesa and back up in two hours. It seems our exploration will be limited to these few acres.”

“That’s true,” says Montreaux. “Still, we’re protected up here.”

Kent says, “Looks kinda like Arizona.”

“Yeah,” says Blount, “’round Coconino County,”

“Why is that name so familiar?” asks Benson.

Blount laughs. “You’re showing your age, kiddo. That’s where—”

“Look!” shouts Montreaux suddenly.

The others follow his outstretched finger skyward with their eyes.

A daytime moon hangs low. It is shaped like a ball of Gouda cheese with an irregular slice taken out of its dorsal side. It is as yellow as a butternut squash.

Everyone is shocked into silence, until Jones speaks.

“It must be an illusion, a trick of the atmosphere. The refractive index of the air, perhaps. No natural astronomical object could be shaped like that. Remember, Carr warned us to be alert for small differences in the physical makeup of this place.”

“Whatever the explanation is,” says Kent irritably, “I don’t like it. Either we can’t trust our senses, or the natural laws here are screwed up bad. Either way, we could be in for trouble.”

“Just get a grip on yourself, Tom,” admonishes Jones. “We’ll be fine as long as we step carefully and hang together. Okay, let’s check out the periphery of this mesa, and see if there’s not an easy way down.”

Adopting a patrol formation, the five move off, Jones is pointman, Blount and Benson are in second rank, and Kent and Montreaux bring up the rear.

As they move toward the edge, Jones wonders briefly if he should rearrange the pairings. Kent—always a touchy type—has had spats in the past with Montreaux, and his nervousness might trigger more today. Tle team cannot afford any such arguments or dissension now. However, Blount and Benson are an efficient duo. The pudgy Blount seems to have a crush on the aloof but tolerant Benson, which makes him extremely solicitous of her welfare. It would be a shame to split them up. No, to shuffle things around might be worse, cause trepidation and nerves, decides Jones. Best to leave the assignments as they are—for now.

Reaching the eastern edge of the mesa, the five halt and peer cautiously down.

The ground is hundreds and hundreds of feet below. A thin thread of blue defines a snaky river. The sides of the formation are absolutely vertical. Here, at least, there are no obvious means of safe descent.

“Okay,” says Jones. “We’ll circle south and inspect the whole perimeter. We might have better luck elsewhere.”

They don’t. A half-hour’s hike around the circumference reveals that they are efficiently bottled up on this desolate mesa, with only a few large cacti for company.

Jones assembles his squad at the original spot of arrival. During the recon, the two pairs of teammates have been conversing quietly between themselves, so that Jones could not overhear. Now everyone falls silent. Overhead, the moon has impossibly crossed a full fifty degrees of the heavens in the short time they have been here.

“Well,” begins Jones, “it seems we’ll have a boring report to make, but sometimes that’s for the best—”

“Fuck you!” shouts Kent.

Jones goggles at Kent until he realizes that Kent's expletive is directed at his partner, Montreaux, and not at Jones himself.

"Tom, get ahold of yourself. What's wrong?"

"It's this bastard Montreaux. He's been bugging me, saying stupid things, trying to burn my ass."

"George, is that true?"

"No way. It's Tom who's the instigator. He's been spouting crazy talk about how we're all gonna die here. I've been trying to calm him down."

Jones tries to ascertain which man is telling the truth, and fails. He looks for help to Doctor Benson, his second-in-command. Jones is grateful when Benson speaks up.

"All right, listen up now. This must be the onset of the psychic abnormalities the test-animals exhibited. Everyone break out their mood-stabilizers."

Following Benson's example, the four men soon hold their individually tailored neurotropin pills in one hand, unstoppered canteens in the other. At a nod from Benson, all five swallow the doses down, Kent grudgingly.

"There," says Jones gratefully, "that should do it. Now, let's split up in pairs—I'll remain here by the drop—and take some sensor readings and samples. See if you can find any traces of animal life, however simple."

His subordinates obey his orders. Jones watches them disperse, then falls to his own sampling of the ground around the poles.

A yell brings Jones out of his concentration.

Montreaux is flat on his back, Kent astride him and choking him. The really odd thing about this scene—the sight that Jones cannot initially accept—is that Montreaux's tongue extends a full twelve inches out of his mouth and is vibrating like a New Year's Eve favor, while his eyes have popped out on stalks. In addition, the victim's face is turning an unnatural royal blue.

Jones rushes toward the pair, sensing Blount and Benson close behind him.

Wrestling Kent off Montreaux, Jones drags the insane assailant to his feet and begins to shake him. When Kent seems a trifle more in possession of himself, Jones releases him.

"What the hell is the explanation for this, Tom? Why would you want to hurt George?"

Kent passes a hand across his brow. “1—I don’t know. It seems I just can’t stand the sight of him.”

Blount and Benson have helped Montreaux up. As inexplicably as it altered, his face has returned to normal, and he seems okay. Jones moves over to examine him.

No one notices that Kent has a grenade in his hand until the pin is pulled.

Jones has time only to shout: “Down, down—!” before it lands in their midst and explodes with a roar.

The smoke clears to reveal four standing figures, centered in a carbonized sunburst of cracked ground. Their white Kevlar armor is streaked with long black trailers of soot. Their hair stands up on end. Otherwise, they are unharmed.

“I can’t believe it,” says Jones with utter bewilderment. “We should all be in little piece…” Suddenly, their survival a given, an insupportable rage overtakes him, at the sight of the unrepentant Kent.

Without conscious decision, Jones makes a fist of his right hand. Gripping this fist with his left hand, he begins to screw his arm into a rubbery coil, armor and all, until it’s entirely compressed at shoulder level. He advances on Kent, who quivers but does not flee. Once in proximity, Jones unleashes his fist.

The mighty blow catches Kent on the jaw. Little multicolored five-pointed stars spray out from the site of impact. Kent’s head rockets back, stretching his elastic neck a full four feet. There is a BOI-OI-OI-NG noise. Kent’s body finally catches up with his head. His feet leave the ground and he arrows twenty yards through the air. He lands in the arms of a large cactus. The arms close on him, spikes piercing through his armor. Kent screams: “Yeeee-oooow!” He shoots straight up into the air, reverses at the zenith, so that his head is pointing down, then plummets. When he hits, he piledrives into the mesa up to his waist.

Jones turns in astonishment to the other three. He barely notices that all effects of the blast have disappeared from their persons, as from his own. “I didn’t mean to— I didn’t know I could—”

No one pays any attention to their leader. Blount is solicitously inquiring after Benson’s postgrenade condition. Montreaux, meanwhile, is laughing at Kent’s fate, doubled up in hysterics, slapping his knees. He falls to the ground, kicking his legs in the air. He rolls onto his belly, pounding the

dust, wetting it with his tears, until there is a large puddle around him. He does not notice Kent's return.

Kent is dirty and full of cactus spikes, but otherwise unhurt. He unshoulders his rifle. Montreaux seems to sense his presence. He ceases laughing, looks up, makes an instant transition to his feet and starts running. Kent lets him go, flicking his rifle to single-shot action. He draws a careful bead on Montreaux's fleeing ass and squeezes off a round. The bullet hits with a noise like a bell being rung in a sideshow shooting gallery. Montreaux jumps straight up—"Yikes!"—then resumes running. Kent begins to chase him around the mesa, stopping now and then take another potshot at his tail.

Jones does not attempt to stop them. He's scared of what he might do to them. Instead, he turns to Benson and Blount. At least they've stayed sane…

Blount is holding Benson's hand. He has somehow progressed from inquiries about the effect of the grenade on her health to fervent protestations of love, made in an atrocious Maurice Chevalier accent.

"Mah leetle pee-geon, you feel mah heart wiz love. Mwa-mwa-mwa-mwa-mwa."

T'nis last noise accompanies Blount's kisses, which he is planting hotly up and down Benson's arm.

"Stop that! Stop that, you—you skunk! Quit it!"

Blount does not heed Benson's wishes. He grabs her waist, tips her backwards so that she is balanced on one foot, the other leg extending out in the air, and begins kissing her neck.

Benson oozes out of Blount's grip as if oiled.

His arms remain in a circle, and he continues to kiss the air for several seconds after she is gone. When he notices her absence, he straightens up.

Benson has her rifle aimed at Blount's midsection. Jones notes with despair that it's on automatic.

"Don't take one step closer—" warns Benson.

"Surely you do not mean zat, ma cherie," says Blount, and takes the fatal step.

Benson lets loose with about two hundred rounds of large-caliber ammo. Jones closes his eyes.

He opens them to see Blount pierced with holes. He is solid through and through, like a potato.

“You have caused a thirst een mah stomach, mah leetle lovebug,” says Blount. He drinks from his canteen. Water spouts from all his bullet-holes like a fountain. “Now zat I am refreshed, let us resume our battle of love.”

Benson tosses her rifle into the air in fright and runs off. Blount drops his knuckles to the ground and pogoes unconcernedly off on all fours after her, bouncing impossibly high into the air with each “step,” stopping once to sniff a cactusflower in mid-pursuit.

Jones is left standing alone. From across the mesa drift sounds of gunfire and explosions, shrieks and shouts of triumph, interspersed with weird sound-effects: slidewhistles, crashes, echoes, reverb, racheting…

Dazed and broken-spirited, Jones trudges off.

He finds himself at the mesa’s edge. He sits despondently down, legs dangling over the abyss. Reflexively, he checks his chronometer. Less than an hour until pickup. He supposes he should be returning to the rendezvous-point, but hasn’t the heart. The mission is a complete failure, a total bust. How can he face Carr and the others and report what he has allowed to occur? Jones grips his head dejectedly and shakes it. There is a rattle as of marbles in a can from inside his cranium.

“BEEP-BEEP!”

Jones is hanging in midair, having made an instantaneous transition from being seated on the cliff-edge to hovering above the abyss. He has just enough time to see an impossible creature standing on the mesa behind him, fluttering its impudent tongue at him, before he realizes that there is nothing below him. He pokes the air tentatively. Yup, that’s plain old air, all right… He tries to run in the air, his legs windmilling, his arms outstretched, but gets nowhere. Then he plummets.

The fall is long.

Jones has plenty of time to anticipate the impact.

When it happens, it knocks him senseless for a while. When he comes to, he realizes he’s still alive, lying at the bottom of a Jones-shaped hole. So, there is no escape from humiliation and failure here, even in death…

Jones climbs wearily out. The inviting river lies a few feet away. He walks to it for a drink. Bending down, he cups his hand and scoops up some water.

A grinning shark zips out and swallows Jones' head and neck. Jones stands up, bearing the shark aloft like a hat, its tail flapping. He gropes around until his hand lands on a petrified stick. With the stick, he begins belaboring the shark with meaty thumps, until it finally releases him and flops back indignantly into the river.

"Yipe-yipe-yipe-yipe!"

This incident has convinced Jones that he must get back to his own universe. His despair has been replaced by renewed ambition. But the portal-locus is far above. He cranes his neck backwards, examining the vertiginous wall. There is nothing for it but to climb.

Jones, utilizing cracks and crevices, begins the ascent.

Such a climb should be impossible. But it is not. It takes nearly half an hour, though.

As he lays his first hand over the rim, he hears a cracking and crumbling. He realizes with a sinking feeling that this portion of the rim is giving way. A mass of rock detaches, carrying Jones back down with it.

Jones lands first. This time he unexplainably does not make a hole. A shadow grows around him. Jones removes his Emergency Umbrella from his belt and opens it over his head. The giant boulder lands on him.

He emerges from beneath it, flat as a pancake, hairy on top, with feet protruding on the bottom. With a SPROING he accordions out, resuming his normal shape.

Wearily, he makes the climb again.

This time he gains the surface of the mesa successfully.

It is almost pickup time.

Jones rushes back to the markers.

He has only one minute to spare. He wishes he could somehow recover the others, but there is no sign of their whereabouts, and no time to search. A better-equipped force can return for them later. Jones stands hopefully between the poles.

Idly, impulsively, using the tip of his boot, Jones draws two parallel lines in the thin dirt, then connects them with crossbars.

The sketch immediately becomes twin gleaming iron rails lying on tarry sleepers. An enormous express train materializes a few yards away, travelling one hundred miles an hour straight for Jones. The impossible creature is driving it. Before Jones can move, he finds himself riding the

cowcatcher across the mesa. When the train reaches the edge it continues onward across a heretofore-nonexistent bridge.

Jones' wails doppler off into the distance.

* * * *

Back at Mission Control, nerves are tightened to the breaking point. A large clock sweeps out the seconds till retrieval with a thin red hand. Carr wishes there were some switch, however symbolic, which he could throw, so he'd feel as if he were instrumental in bringing the team home. But the whole return process, like the dispatch, is under the control of the machines.

Carr checks his watch, then the clock, then his watch again. The other members of the Mission Control stand at their stations, watching their readouts, alert for any significant fluctuations in the fabric of the dimensions. The assembled members of the intelligence community exchange glances only they can interpret.

The whine of the generator is rising, rising—

Zero hour arrives.

No one is breathing.

The generators unleash their snap, like the cracking of some hunter-god's whip.

No explorers reappear. The stage is empty.

Initially, everyone is stunned by the failure of the explorers to return. There is absolute silence for a time. Then, two things happen simultaneously.

Carr notes that although the generator has been automatically shut down, the connection between the dimensions remains open. At the far end of the cornucopia is a tiny circle, bright with sun and sand and a small crazy Herriman moon.

At the same time, the technicians begin nervously calling out their reports.

"Planck's Constant dropping!"

"Boltzmann's Constant increasing—up to one point three eight zero four two—"

"Avogadro's Constant falling. Down by point zero zero zero zero zero zero three!"

A phone rings; someone answers. She listens, then drops the receiver, white-faced.

“That was Cerro Tololo Observatory. Hubble’s Constant is changing!”

A hot wind blows out of the ring, smiting Carr. He grows dizzy, puts a hand to his head. It seems he can see the distant single headlight of a train approaching out of the tiny circle, hear its mad whistle. A set of railroad tracks suddenly snaps into being, leading out of the concentric rings of the annulus, across the floor, where they sever cables and pipes, and through the wall of the soundstage, which has opened in a train-shaped hole.

Carr feels at last that he has to speak, all the enormous responsibility devolving on him. Everyone’s shocked faces are imploring him. But what to say? What words can possibly sum up the utter finality of the disastrous mission?

At last it comes to him, the phrase tripping over his unwieldy tongue:

“Tha—tha—that’s all, folks!”

AUTHOR’S NOTE

Isaac Asimov often told the story of how he wrote a tale about aliens who lived at the top of Mount Everest and prevented any humans from reaching the summit. That story had the misfortune to appear in print the same month Sir Edmund Hillary reached the top of that peak.

Likewise, my story below saw print just as *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* debuted in thousands of theaters around the planet. I had never heard of the original novel or its author prior to that fine film. But now, instantly, my story looked like a total copycat production, rendered minor by comparison to Gary Wolfe’s masterpiece. Of course, it was parallel evolution, not theft, but try telling that to anyone then. I hope in the decades that have passed, my claim seems more plausible.

Science Fiction Eye was the top critical zine of the immediate post-cyberpunk era, and published only one fiction issue. I felt proud to be a part of its excellence for all but the first installment.

ADVENTURES IN COGNITIVE HOMOGAMY: A LOVE STORY

Handsome Kioga Matson, waking from a fitful programmed microsleep imperfectly contoured by the experimental orexin-modulating drug Ailurexant he had self-prescribed, and landing once again in yet another of those Science Parks that constituted his insular and discontiguous adopted homeland, a quasi-state composed of homogenous R&D and prototyping sites in a globe-girdling network of exclusive brainpower, had to pause a moment on consciousness's hazier edges, an interzone fuzzed also by an ongoing bad episode of Kyoto Duck Flu against which he had been administering a powdered antiviral inhalant from NexBio, DAS939, in order to recall exactly what antiquated nation-state now hosted him.

Looking blurrily out the window as the SonicStar plane taxied, he saw a line of modest mountains ringing, at some distance, the small corporate landing field. So this could not be Kalundborg in Denmark nor Seletar in Singapore nor Granta in the United Kingdom. But it could very well have been Sunlight in Montana, USA, or Acheson in Canada or Baikampady in India. Very disorienting.

A glimpse of some lush emerald tropical vegetation caused the knowledge of his current destination to click into place in his memory. He had come down in Parque Arví, Medellín, Colombia. Along with other boffins Kioga was to participate in a presentation for MercoSur trade reps, his field of expertise being industrial metabolics. And he was also to spend a full glorious twenty-four hours in the presence of his fiancée, Mallory Sloper, whom he had not seen in six whole weeks.

In theory, what bliss!

And yet, Kioga found himself strangely unexcited at the prospect of reconnecting with his bride-to-be. He imagined with some degree of accuracy that much of their private time here would be spent firming up the endless details of their elaborate wedding next year—details that had already consumed a myriad of online hours when apart—and that rather too little time would be spent with any kind of preferable bedroom athletics. This skewed ratio of work to fun irked Kioga, and he had to strive hard to

convince himself that everything would be different after they were married.

As the groundcrew wheeled a set of steps up to the opening hatch of the jet, Matson sneezed suddenly with contaminatory gale force. He fumbled out a packet of tissues and evacuated his nostrils, preparatory to blasting another hit of DAS939 into his sinuses. That task done, he woke his nap-silenced phone and, feeling somewhat guilty at his ingratitude toward Mallory's majestic and unyielding love, rang her up. She'd be happy if he checked in immediately upon landing and disgruntled if he didn't—though she would never admit her displeasure, instead merely affecting a certain sharpness of voice that cloaked ostensibly jovial phrases in sonic barbed wire.

The superfine patrician bonestructure of his beloved's face, wrapped in seemingly poreless peachy flesh finer than spidersilk, filled his phone's retina+ display. Since last telephonically encountered, Mallory had changed her hairstyle to a platinum pixie cut layered with living crimson pinfeathers that tapped her scalp's blood supply to stay perpetually vibrant.

"Darling! You beat me to Colombia. And I so wanted to be there to meet you! But the Osaka conference ran long."

"It's just as well. I'm a bit under the weather. *La grippe canard*. I can use a little downtime first."

"Well, I'm somewhere over the Pacific at the moment. ETA about two hours from now."

"Fine. You can wake your Prince Charming with a kiss."

"But of course! And then—"

Kioga brightened. "And then?"

"We simply have to discuss the guest list!"

Kioga suppressed a wince. The dreaded guest list discussion had already occupied one-hundred-and-fifty-two-point-five hours of his life. He knew the stat precisely from totalling all the automatically tagged hours in his lifelog. Sometimes it seemed that this endless parsing of the relative affinity bonds of friends, relatives and business associates would extend into infinity, finding an angel-winged Kioga still indecisively parcelling out seats in the heavenly cloudbanks.

"Of course. I can't wait. See you soon."

"*Mwah*! Bye for now, lover."

* * * *

Lodgings for braintrust gypsies at Parque Arví were, of course, more or less identical with the facilities at a hundred other Science Parks, an organically efficient architecture and interior design that bespoke a kind of stern technocratic accomodation with the needs of the flesh and spirit, acknowledging that a measured slight amount of earned pampering was conducive to productivity and creativity, while any hints of hedonism would amount to a venal betrayal of a sacred, semi-public trust, not to mention stockholder bottomline expectations.

Kioga's phone checked him in as he walked through the lobby, instantly making his location known to everyone in his social and business networks. Greetings and memos filled his message queue, but the phone flagged nothing for his immediate attention. A message from Jimmy Velvet, declaring boisterously that Jimmy himself would imminently be "hot-cradling in Parque Arví," lifted Kioga's spirits. Any time spent with Mr. James Swinburne Vervet would involve exotic inebriants, Planck-level conversation, and possible rousing altercations with offended pecksniffs and grundies of all stripes. But right now, Kioga felt relieved to have a couple of hours to himself.

Up in his room Kioga unpacked his small bag, his essential invariant kit. He propped a dented, military-hardened, brushed aluminum digital picture frame on his dresser top. A memento of his recently deceased (?) mother, Brenda, the frame cycled through photos of the Matson family: a sprawling, well-fed, bright-eyed Anglo clan, jolly as a whitebread Christmas pudding with one dark little raisin embedded.

Kioga regarded that selfsame grownup raisin in the smart mirror over the dresser. (The mirror flashed a mild warning that his body temperature was one-point-seven degrees above normal, courtesy of *la grippe canard*.) Six-two, burnt sienna skin, hair buzzed almost to nullity, at age twenty-eight he resembled, some said, Uganda's still vibrant elder statesman, President Frank Mugisha.

Not exactly a phenotype in conformity with his adopted kin.

Twenty-five years ago, in 2015, Brenda Matson had been a KBR mercenary attached to the USA's AFRICOM forces based in Entebbe, Uganda, where they waged a cat-and-mouse contest with the fighters of al-Shabaab. Captured after a fierce firefight in the bush, Brenda Matson had

been removed to a tiny remote village on the shores of Lake Kioga that hosted the terrorist cell. There she had been securely bound and dumped into a big multifamily hut, all gnarly poles, mud-walls and palm-thatched roof. Hot, smelly, claustrophobia-inducing, with manic house geckos skittering every which way.

Brenda's training served to tamp down but not utterly eradicate a fear that threated to swell to panic if she should divert her will for a second. Her zip-tied wrists and ankles ached. Everyone she could see, from the male fighters to the women and adolescents, were heavily armed with Chinese weapons. Everyone, in short, except for Brenda and a very charming naked boychild of three. Oddly enough, the neglected toddler, ignored by the chattering flustered and hyperactive adults, had gravitated instinctively to Brenda, eventually falling asleep against her cramped side while, numb, nervous, hungry and stinking, Brenda awaited rescue.

Within a few hours of the geo-stabilization of her transponder-chipped person, and following an indetectible UAV survey of the scene, AFRICOM softly deposited a Bee Hive in the middle of the village.

From the armaments package emerged hundreds of lethal thumb-sized aerial drones, rocketing on burst chemical propellants. The pack of angry discriminating bees promptly drilled straight through the skulls of all the belligerents before their fingers could even compress a trigger, leaving Brenda and the little, suddenly wailing boy the only living inhabitants of the carnage.

When the AFRICOM forces came for her, Brenda thought she was fine.

But that didn't explain why she insisted irrationally on squeezing the lone young survivor tight to her chest and refusing to be parted from him, while issuing mad threats of physical assault against her comrades, even while she was being carried on a stretcher into the waiting copter.

Kioga Matson often rehearsed this chapter of his autobiography. He recalled nothing genuine of the fateful incident, but had heard the tale so many times that he had developed vivid false memories of it. Yet oddly enough, they were all channeled from his mother's POV. He saw himself clutched to her chest as if in some Nollywood biopic of Brenda's life.

Kioga's adoption into an upper-middle-class American family ensured that, barring some grand personal failure of character, ill health or a suite of implacable vices he would slide effortlessly into the meritocracy. He failed

to encounter even a whiff of racism in the exclusive enlightened realms through which he sailed as a boy and teen and young adult; developed his propensity for economics and science into expertise in the field of industrial metabolism—the displine of charting and optimizing how raw materials and energy were turned into products and waste; and his departure from graduate school at the laudable age of twenty-three found him firmly emplaced in the Science Park network, earning an admirable salary and feeling generally fulfilled.

His engagement to Mallory Sloper, powerful witch of the carbon-sequestration wizard clan, whom he had met three years ago at an epochal gathering in Migdal HaEmek, Israel, only reinforced his feelings of good fortune and gratitude.

He hoped he had thanked his mother often enough for giving him this wonderful life, so far above the global norm and so far above his lot at birth. There would be no more such filial opportunities to render gratitude and love. After her exemplary stint as a grunt, Brenda Matson had graduated into the spectral ranks of international spook-dom, and just last year had gone missing in the mountains of Khövsgöl, Mongolia, on the track of a subversive group calling itself Lex Talionis.

* * * *

Turning away from the dresser mirror, Kioga once more affirmed his own happiness with how his life had developed.

And yet—and yet—there was one wordless part of him, buried deep and generally ignored, that still dwelled in prelapsarian bliss on the simple shores of his natal lake.

Kioga forwent another dose of Ailurexant and yet got a surprisingly solid natural nap. He awoke at noon—the presentation was scheduled for 2 PM—and, refreshed and wearing a trig new Buddy Cheetah smart suit in fawn and aurora orange, ambled to the commissary.

The air here in vegetation-rich, manicured Parque Arví was wholesome and fragrant. No noise penetrated the pastoral campus from the city of five million people—rich and poor, struggling and well-off—that stretched away in all directions from the base of the lofty enclave, extending also in ramshackle vertiginous barrios halfway up the mountainside until the squatters encountered the lethal perimeter of the Science Park.

An energetic conversational knot occupied the lobby of the dining hall, and Kioga was startled to spot Mallory thoroughly engaged with a host of fellow savants, some of whom Kioga recognized, others not. He came up behind his fiancée and gently clasped her elbow.

“Oh, hello, dear, how are you?” She pecked his cheek. “Stuart and I got so busy on the flight talking about the latest exciting work out of Biorecro that we just couldn’t break away. They’ve increased the uptake in their transgenic poplar trees by fifteen percent!”

Stuart Holliston, tan and swimmer-fit, bestowed upon Kioga a smile dangerously close to a smirk. “Your lovely woman has some great notions about how to monetize this, Matson. If you’re not careful, she’s going to make you both filthy rich.”

“Oh, I’m decidedly high-maintenance, Stuart. A regular luxury sink. I’ll spend her money faster than those poplars suck up CO^2.”

Kioga waited a moment for Mallory to break off and accompany him to table, but she showed no signs of wanting to flee present company. So he simply said, “I’m very hungry, so I’ll see you after the presentation.”

He walked into the dining hall feeling crestfallen and sad.

But sight of Jimmy Velvet seated at a table and surrounded by seemingly every waitress in the commissary cheered Kioga immensely. He strode over.

Jimmy familiarly held the hand of one young uniformed woman, a native beauty, and chattered in rapidfire Spanish that caused her to grin and nod. Finished, he kissed her hand and she departed, giggling, with her fellow refectory angels.

“Ky, my ligand! You’re just in time! I’ve only now promoted a bottle of Valdivieso 2035 from that brilliant lass. What a peach! And that gorgeous rump! As for the wine, it’s a trifling Chilean Champagne. Undoubtedly inferior to the Veuve Clicquot you regularly bathe in, but needs must. Not on the menu, but the Director has a private stock. Join me, lig, join me!”

The wine arrived in a homeostatic chiller, along with two giant bowls of steaming ajiaco soup, with succulent avocado on the side. Kioga realized then just how famished he was. He forked up the floating encobbed corn from his bowl and stripped it clean in well under sixty seconds. Jimmy matched him, bite for bite. The cold bubbly went down smoothly and seemed not to interact badly with Kioga’s meds, leaving him feeling

bouyant and vivid. And for business purposes, he could always pop a tab of Null-borracho if necessary.

Their hearty soup finished, awaiting the dessert of bocadillo and panelitas (guava and panela candy), Jimmy dabbed neatly at his lips with a cloth napkin. “So, I see Mallory is networking up a storm while she’s here. And we’ve got the presentation in an hour or so. Does all that leave any time or spirit whatsoever for a little mattress gymnastics? Or will you be debating candied almonds versus cocktail wienies until the wee hours of this splendid, moon-kissed tropical night?”

Kioga winced. He felt he had to defend Mallory against the very charges he himself had been harboring a little while ago. “Come on now, Jim, she’s not at all like that. You’re being much too harsh on the woman I’m going to spend the rest of my life with.”

“Better I speak now than when the matrimonial saddle is fully cinched.”

“I’m certain the orgiastic noises spilling from my quarters tonight will shock the entire staff.”

“Hrm. Well, if you find yourself at loose ends this evening, be advised that I and some others are heading into the city. The Zona Rosa, Poblado ’hood. The Parque Lleras district, to be precise. Many, many square blocks of wanton women, inveigling intoxicants, hip-oiling music and fingerfoods of the gods. Or so I’ve been promised.”

“Thanks. But I know I’ll be extremely busy with my own exclusive amorous affairs.”

“Your phone knows my phone, lig. Hey, look at the time! We’re due a mile away a week ago! What are they using for personal transport here? Not those cheesy little Tata PicoPods! Oh, my word! My spine will never be the same….”

Kioga tried to spot Mallory as they rushed out, but she was nowhere to be seen.

Large yet somehow intimate, with its reconfigurable walls and fixtures, the conference room already held all the expectant and highly polished Mercosur representatives when Jimmy and Kioga arrived. Kioga felt pleased that he was not the last braintruster to show up. In fact, Mallory and Stuart kept everyone waiting till a whole ninety seconds past the scheduled start of the presentation. His fiancée smiled hastily at him, squeezed his

shoulder in the manner of a sports teammate in passing, then settled down at her assigned seat.

The group presentation went well, thought Kioga, although, truth be told, he gave only half his concentration to the speeches, even including his own part. The only slight glitch occurred when Jimmy, explaining the efficacy of the new options for seabed mining, his speciality, likened the process to "hoovering vomit off a Scotsman." But aside from that gaffe, the Mercosur suits seemed well pleased with the valuable new insights and profit-enhancing technologies presented to them.

When the meeting broke up, the time was almost seven PM. Kioga hastened to Mallory's side, intent on cutting her out of the herd.

"Oh, Ky, so wonderful to be together at last. I've missed you so!" She fussed with her phone. "Step over here a minute with me, please."

Mallory guided Kioga behind some slowly repositioning panels she had requisitioned that pivoted and angled, butterfly-gentle, to enclose them in a privacy alcove. She gazed at him with her limpid driftglass eyes and Kioga felt his heart get the whim-whams.

"Ky, dear—I've just realized what's truly important in our relationship."

Kioga could hardly believe his ears. "Yes, dearest?"

"We need to make babies. Several of them. Just as soon as we're married."

This urgent procreative gameplan was the last thing Kioga had been expecting to hear. Naturally, he was disconcerted, so much so that he had trouble composing a response. But Mallory filled in the conversational gap.

"Have you been following the newsfeeds lately? Something clicked inside me today. I had the most startling revelation. Life-changing, in fact. It *jumped* out at me when I was talking with the others at lunch. I realized that despite everything the Science Parks have been doing, this world is still in dire shape. Just look at those weird *things* breeding in the Pacific Garbage Patch—my god! Oh, of course we've made been great progress. Essential stuff got done just in time, and is continuing to get done, thanks to our kind of people. We've halted the planet's tragic slide over the past twenty years. Without us, and people of our cadre, there would have been nothing but chaos and suffering, mass die-offs and one unending catastrophe after another.

“But the idiocracy is outbirthing us! Nine billion humans right now, with another two billion to come before population growth is finally halted. More and more marching morons to fuck things up, every minute! Now, I know we don’t have to match their numbers one for one. We have brains and talent and money and organization and virtue and character on our side. But still, it’s a race to the finish, which element in the equation will determine the outcome for the planet. Will it be our smarts, or their animal fecundity? Can we possibly save the breeders from themselves?”

Mallory gripped both of Kioga’s hands and gazed imploringly and sincerely into his eyes. He could not doubt her sudden passion for the topic.

“And here I was, worried over the trivialities of our wedding, when I should have been focused on blending our superior genepools to produce the next generation of global saviors. Cognitive homogamy, to ensure our future security.”

Cognitive homogamy? Next generation of global saviors? Suddenly Kioga felt like the Virgin Mary. Or was Mallory Mary and he the Holy Ghost?

“That’s why I know you’ll understand, Ky, when I explain that I have to leave right away tonight. Stuart has presented me with a rare chance to earn a solid nestegg for our future family. But I’ve got to jump on it immediately. We want to give our children the best start in life, don’t we? Of course, I knew you’d agree! So kiss me quickly now, and I promise you that there’ll be no more foolish talk of seating arrangements. We’re going to get married as simply and quickly as possible, once we’re together again. I’ve consulted my schedule, and that appears to be at Instituto Butantan, Sao Paulo, three months from now. And then we can start raising our superior brood.”

Mallory was pressing her lips efficiently against Kioga’s before he knew what was happening, the wings of their little shelter had parted, and she was gone.

Outside the conference building Kioga found Jimmy Velvet waiting for him. Jimmy mantled Kioga’s shoulders with a comradely arm and said, with lateral, soreness-deflecting tact, “As Omar the Goofy Sufi once remarked, ‘I often wonder what the punters buy one half so noxious as the stuff they swill.’ Let us conduct our own field trials, my lig!”

* * * *

The nighted, OLED-lit, club-dense, numbered streets around the small Parque Lleras throbbed with roisterous humanity. Kioga found himself so instantly and immersively swept up in the weekend carnival of flesh and frolic that all the hurt and confusion surrounding Mallory's absurdly sociological treatment of their love dwindled down to a tiny, almost totally ignorable kernel of disappointment and unease located, as best as Kioga could tell, midway between his navel and groin.

Jimmy started the liquid part of the night's menu by ordering mojitos made with maracuya passion fruit. Apparently it was illegal for the drinks to be served in any container smaller than liter-sized plastic tumblers. Toting his beverage through the happy crowd gyrating to ambient music—some kind of chutney-fado melange, at once hip-shaking and mournful—Kioga marvelled at the scads of beautiful women sauntering arm-in-arm. Apparently, Colombia produced nothing along the XX lines but gorgeous females ranging the spectrum from pixieish waif to Junoesque Amazon. He felt lubricious stirrings all throughout his body that promised to drown, at least temporarily, the radioactive kernel of regret Mallory had implanted.

Jimmy intuited Kioga's thoughts and said in a loud voice that still hardly penetrated the surf of speech and music, "Colombia's number three globally in recreational somatic tailoring! More licensed and unlicensed omics tweakers than Brazil and Macau combined! Be careful though! They're not all baseline double-ex! If that even matters!"

Having manfully dealt with their original cocktails, Kioga and his pal began an increasingly unsteady crawl through a variety of clubs and bars, intent on participating fully in the scene, sampling all the native drinks while not neglecting a modest amount of alcohol-buffering foodstuffs. After a few hours of metronomic imbibing, close to midnight, Kioga devoured two plates of aborrajados, cheese-packed plantain fritters, followed by some arepas de chócolo, and achieved a momentary lucidity, the eye of a swirling internal ethanol hurricane.

He found himself precariously perched atop a stilt-legged bamboo chair at a quaintly neon-decorated bar. Jimmy was visible nowhere.

Kioga turned to his left, and discovered an alluring woman staring at him with frank interest.

Rather petite, yet busty and well-curved, the woman wore her long dark hair simply, in lustrous parallel curtains that framed a strong set of features:

hazel eyes topped with naturally thick eyebrows; delicately hooked nose; wide expressive mouth lipsticked a Boysenberry shade; an impudent chin. She wore a tight-fitting short-sleeved shirt, on whose front abstract animated artwork ceaselessly replicated the colorful gyrations of the autocatalytic Belousov–Zhabotinsky reaction; simple classic piña-spidersilk jeans; and high-heeled lizard-skin espadrilles.

"*Hola*," Kioga managed.

"You are from Parque Arví," responded the woman in English.

Kioga's Science Park affiliation had never sounded less glamorous. "Is it that obvious? Couldn't I be, oh, some rich princeling from Swaziland?"

"Yes, I think maybe. In another life. But I heard you and your friend talking, so I know different. But why are you here?"

Kioga swivelled around, away from the woman, and almost fell off his stool. "Jimmy! Where are you, Jimmy! I'm being cruelly interrogated!"

The woman laughed brilliantly. "Your friend cannot help you now. He has gone off with two very indecorously dressed tarts. This is the correct word, I think, 'tarts?'"

"Knowing Jimmy, it is probably an entirely accurate description."

"Very well, then. You have no hope of rescue. So, I ask, why are you here?"

"Well, just to have a good time."

"You cannot do that in Parque Arví, with others of your kind?"

"Hey now, wait just a minute. 'My kind?' I'm as human as you, aren't I?"

"Sometimes I wonder. You Science Park people seldom descend to this level. You live apart from me and my kind. You work with each other, play with each other—marry each other. Maybe you are indeed a separate species—or becoming one. It is very much like something I read once, by a Mister Wells."

Kioga felt vaguely offended. "Except that we Eloi are the ones in this scenario who do all the work."

The woman's delicate nostrils flared. "Ha! You think I and my friends do not labor like donkeys, just to survive! I could show you such things—"

"Oh, you work hard, I'm sure. That is, those of you who aren't on some kind of government dole. But even your best workers don't really perform intelligently, or with any long-term vision. You're too focused on pleasure,

and instant gratification. You have no code to live by, as we do in the Parks. No guiding principles."

"Instant gratification! I would be instantly gratified to kick you in *los huevos* right this minute!"

Kioga held up a placatory palm. "Okay, stop. Somehow we got off on the wrong foot. Couldn't we start over? My name is Kioga Matson."

"Please accept my apologies. I am Avianna Barranquilla."

They shook hands. Avianna had a strong grip, noted Kioga. Yet still, her small hand, lost in his, proclaimed a femininity he found inflaming to his rising lust. A brief flash of Mallory's terse goodbye kiss interrupted his wet reveries, then dissipated like exhausted utility fog in a maker cabinet.

"Can I buy you a drink?"

"Gracias. Just a Club Colombia beer, if you please."

Kioga opted for the same. A sweetish lager, the beer refreshed Kioga without contributing too much more to his inebriated state.

"You know I work for the Science Parks, Avianna. But what do you do?"

She looked slightly distressed. "It is a long story. Basically, I am trying to help my brother with an entrepreneurial project of his. But perhaps we should avoid speaking of our vocations too much, yes? It seems a touchy subject. All my fault, I admit."

"All right then. What should we talk about?"

"Well, what do you think of my beautiful country?"

"To be honest, I've hardly seen enough of it to form a worthwhile opinion. Parque Arví, of course, is well run and has produced some good things—but that's true of every other Science Park on the planet. The people I've seen downtown here seem happy and healthy and carefree and congenial—but I assume they're middle class or above and quite secure. I don't know anything about other levels of your society, so I can't say how prosperous or equitable your nation is. As for your country's politics—sorry, no idea. Just not relevant to my life or anything that really counts in this world."

Kioga paused to sip his beer, and the influx of alcohol prodded his courage and tongue.

"However, I will *happily* proclaim with the *utmost* sincerity that Colombia produces the *hottest* women I've seen in my last *dozen* assignments."

Avianna seemed unperturbed by his overblown statement, and in fact appreciative of the compliment. Her smile lit up her face.

“You truly think so? Myself included? But perhaps you are just being polite?”

Kioga placed a bold hand on her knee. “I always tell the truth to *una chica muy linda*.”

Avianna failed to raise an objection to his touch. “And I always accept protests of honesty from a handsome man. Let us celebrate our mutual accomodations.”

Before Kioga quite realized an order had even been placed, the bartender was delivering a bottle of clear booze, which Avianna commandeered.

“This is *aguardiente antioqueño*. Once opened, the bottle must be finished.”

“Start pouring!”

Somehow Kioga found himself on a dancefloor—whether in the same club where he had met Avianna or a different one, he couldn’t say. The explosively loud and high-BPM music seemed to be located within his skull. Avianna was grinding against him, all lean flanks and tight roundels of ass. She cast a sultry, smoldering backwards glance every half minute or so that sent ripples through his loins. Finally Kioga couldn’t withstand the erotic sensations. He spun Avianna around, clutched her length tightly against his own burning skin and kissed her. Her tongue drove back against his.

They were at the bar—some bar, any bar—again, and Avianna was proferring a bowl of snacks.

“What’s this—these? What is it?”

“Ai, *hombre*! These are *las hormigas culonas*. Fried ants! They are so good for your manhood. Just try them!”

Kioga grabbed a sloppy handful, crunched them up. Not bad. One ant popped liquidly. Weird…

Outside everything whirled. Colored lights with nimbuses, demonically laughing people, screeching night birds, automobiles powered with infernal electricity. Boozily, Kioga marveled that the aguardiente seemed to have positively killed all his flu germs.

“Try to walk, Kioga, just a few more steps. Here is the car.”

Car? What car? He and Jimmy had gotten dropped off by Parque Arví staff.

Kioga laughed deliriously at the thought of Jimmy in a taxi. That had to be the answer. “Jimmy! Jimmy! Where are you, my lig?”

The car door opened and a strange man said in a kindly but forceful manner, “Oh, Mister Matson, Jimmy cannot help you now.”

* * * *

The smell of a leaky bioreactor allowed Kioga to focus his newly reborn consciousness. As an expert in industrial metabolics, he could not mistake the yeasty pong. So many clients had benefitted from his help in optimizing their production lines. Surely these new owners would be no exception. Gotta show them that Science Park boffins had the best goods. He must be out on the fab floor now. Though how he had gotten here remained unclear….

With eyelids hoisted leadenly upwards, however, Kioga did not see the expected gleaming large-scale facility of pipes and filtration units. Instead, he discovered a dank, poorly lit basement stuffed with amateur kit. A black economy sartorialist suite. The cheap bioluminescent jellyfish scabbed to the walls lent everything a suboceanic tint.

He found himself lying on a rickety cot. Seated patiently on folding chairs opposite him were three men—and Avianna. The innocuous yet competent-looking men wore stern, unmenacing expressions. Avianna looked only slightly less dour and no-nonsense.

“You return from your sad little decadent spree,” said the woman. “*Bueno*. Now we can discuss things.”

Kioga sat up, causing tectonic stresses in his abused head. “Oh, my Christ! Don’t you have any Null-borracho, please?”

One of the men dispensed a pill with a glass of water. “Not Null-borracho. Much better. Homemade.”

With no choice, Kioga uneasily accepted the foreign pharma. Ingestion brought astonishingly swift relief. He momentarily pondered inquiring about the formula, then decided he had more pressing issues.

“Now, discuss what?”

“How you will help us,” said Avianna.

“Us? Who’s us?”

“Me and my brother, Hernán.”

Avianna indicated one of the men, a stolid, lantern-jawed fellow with a somewhat aggrieved air, like a bright hopeful child unjustly sentenced to a remedial class. He wore a tight t-shirt with the famous logo of prestigious edX University over his admirably chiseled chest.

“Our two friends here need not be named,” Avianna continued. “They are just along for muscle, should you prove unruly. It is the plight of my brother that matters.”

Hernán nodded graciously, with some deference, as if sheepish at the necessity of invoking non-familial assistance. “I will gladly explain, Mister Matson. We would not have brought you here if matters were not otherwise beyond our resolution. You see—”

Kioga suddenly sprang to his feet, sheets of acrid binge sweat gushing like spring freshets from his entire body. The Colombians reared back, startled, the two unidentified men reaching behind their backs and toward unseen waistband holsters.

A vision had burst upon Kioga: his young mother, captive in an African hut; the lethal Bee Hive device; himself a toddler—

“My phone! Where’s my phone! They’ll be homing in on it. If they think I’ve been kidnapped—”

Seeing Kioga meant no assault, the bodyguards dropped their readiness to deal hasty freeform hurt. Avianna placed a calming hand on Kioga’s arm.

“Your phone is taking a journey on a plane to Bogota. There is no need to worry.”

“But I’m chipped, too! Look!”

Kioga pushed one arm of his jacket upward to show the branded patch of skin above his subdermal tracker. But to his surprise, the brand was gone, replaced by a large bruise whose dull pain now faintly registered for the first time.

Avianna smiled. “We borrowed an ultrasonic medical device from the local hospital. Extracorporeal shock wave treatment. What you would receive for kidney stones. Most effective, and totally non-invasive.”

Kioga plopped down on his cot, his thrumming nerves slowly stabilizing. He didn’t know whether to be angry, relieved or impressed. “My god, I thought—”

Avianna regarded Kioga with a quizzical tenderness. “Did you really care that we four might die, Mister Matson? You surely would have survived, and then you would have been happily rid of our unwanted attentions.”

“Of course I care! What kind of monster do you think I am, anyhow?

Avianna squeezed his arm. “No kind of monster at all—Kioga. Especially if you lend us your help. This is why we picked you, over your friend Jimmy. He is such a nihilist. Not like you. Now, just listen…”

The region around Medellín, particularly the state of Chocó, had been gold mining territory for many decades, ever since the country had sought to diversify from its drug cultivation at the same time that global prices for gold had soared. But so many of the unregulated companies played fast and loose with the environment, gouging the gold out of the deep-riven earth and processing it with cyanide and mercury that contaminated the land.

Hernán Barranquilla had worked as an environmental engineer for one of the larger players, Conquistador Mining, although his budget had been practically nonexistent and any corporate support for his department a public relations sham. Nonetheless, he had discovered a very valuable wild microbe in the ore tailings. It thrived by metabolizing poisons, although poorly, leaving its milieu marginally cleaner than received. With much labor, over many months of off-duty nights and weekends, Hernán had tailored the bug, right here in this basement lab, to perform miracles of remediation. He had brought the improved bug to Conquistador first, thinking they would license it. Instead, they had stolen it, confiscating all samples, and fired its inventor.

“But if I could only get back even a trace quantity of the microbe, Mister Matson,” Hernán explained, “I could prove my ownership. Establish a patent and market my invention to help my country.”

“How is that?”

“I have encrypted my proprietary information into the genome of the microbe. It cannot be removed without ruining the best features of the bug. Any readout of the genome proves my claims.”

Kioga thought about this story. The clever hack appealed to him, a natural extension of his industrial metabolics concerns. He felt sorry for this ingenuous guy, up against corporate perfidy. And being able to help Avianna’s brother—

Kioga regarded the woman with what he hoped was a righteously indignant glower that communicated, with high semiotic wattage: *You deliberately led me along by my dick and abducted me and now you have the nerve to ask for my help!?!*

Avianna looked deeply and sincerely and adorably contrite. “Mister Matson—Kioga. Please forgive us. We do not know any powerful people who could come to our aid. The local authorities are all in the pockets of Conquistador. Someone like you represented our only hope. When you descended among us, it was like an angel arriving from heaven. But still, we suspected you would brush off any solicitations we made openly, so we had to bring you here under our control. Our tactics were heavy-handed, yes. But can’t you accept them as a genuine expression of our helplessness?”

Exercising his imagination and empathy, Kioga had to admit to himself that he probably would have followed the same course, were their situations reversed. Life outside the Science Parks, he already knew, bred desperation and ethical shortcuts, and this incident merely confirmed his estimation of the scene.

“No, I guess not. Your intentions weren’t evil or selfish. But still, kidnapping someone—”

Avianna hurled herself around Kioga’s neck, squeezed him tightly, kissed both his cheeks, then unpeeled herself and bounced back, before he could possibly even respond with any gesture, fraternal or lewd. All the Colombians were smiling, even the anonymous muscle.

“Oh, I knew you would be on our side, Kioga! Surely, victory is ours now!”

“What exactly am I supposed to do?”

“We will reveal our plans in a moment. But first, let us have a small meal. It is well past noon.”

Kioga pondered this previously unremarked passage of time: long hours after he was due back at Parque Arví. What would Mallory be feeling? She would surely be worried, instrumental in searching for him, raising hell. Best to get this unanticipated chore over with quickly, so he could resume his normal life.

Lunch practically brought tears to Kioga’s eyes, it tasted so good: arepas, those ubiquitous corn pancakes, filled with salmon and shrimp, with a big

cool glass of fresh guanabana juice.

“I am so glad you like my cooking,” said Avianna.

Wasting no postprandial time, his captors bundled Kioga into a Baolong Motors SUV. Blinking in the sunlight, he discerned that Hernán’s lab was still within the city. No point in hiding its location, he guessed, since he knew Avianna’s identity already.

Hernán, driving, and Avianna, shotgun, sat up front, Kioga sandwiched behind between the guards. They headed southwest, steadily climbing out of the valley-nestled city center.

“What we wish you to do,” Avianna said, “is merely to present yourself at the offices of Conquistador. Explain who you are. They will be very impressed. Everyone knows and respects the Science Parks. Ask for a tour of the waste stream processing. We are betting that Hernán’s bug will be present. Steal a sample somehow. This is the only tricky part. But it can be as simple as getting your sleeve wet in the slurry. Just do not arouse their suspicions. Then, when you leave, we will pick you up, claim the sample, and your part in the affair is over. You can go back to the Science Parks with our thanks, and forget you ever knew us.”

Kioga contemplated the chore. It seemed trivial, harmless, safe. “Okay.”

Climbing, twisting, climbing, Kioga noted changes in terrain, vegetation and human settlement. Amid the fantastical foliage, he witnessed large swaths of poverty and rampant want, suffering and a makeshift, make-do existence. Here, firsthand, as impactful as a trash fire, was the backwardness and lack he was intent on ameliorating. Alien and incomprehensible in many respects, the scene nonetheless whispered enticingly to him, a parent calling back a changeling son.

Surprisingly, despite the squalor and material scarcity, many of the people looked happy and content.

“Avianna.”

“Yes?”

“You really picked me out of all the Science Park people?”

Looking back, she smiled. “There is much public data about all of you. But your profile was the most congenial.”

Kioga sat silent for a while.

“Avianna.”

“Yes?”

“What will you get out of all this?”

“If my brother is a rich man, I am sure he will be good to me.”

“*Si*,” said Hernán.

“I think I might like to study medicine. I trained as an EMT for a time, but I had to cease my courses out of necessity.”

“Well, maybe I could help somehow. That is, if I ever returned here.”

“Perhaps.”

Two hours passed in relative silence. The SUV finally stopped at an empty portion of road high in the mountains. Fenced-off property stretched along one side of the tarmac.

“This is our rendezvous spot. We will come back in three hours. The gate to the Conquistador operations is about half a kilometer down the road, around that bend. We must leave you here. Otherwise, we will come under their surveillance.”

Kioga let himself out of the vehicle. “How do you know I won’t just get help and never return?”

Avianna bestowed a broad smile. “But you gave us your word, Kioga.”

The SUV made a gravel-crunching three-point turn.

“Goodbye, Kioga. Thank you, and good luck!”

Kioga watched them go, then walked around the bend.

He could see the gated entrance and guard shack, all razor wire and robotic antipersonnel emplacements.

The booth was manned by three armed security workers. Kioga straightened his rumpled jacket and went up to them. They regarded him vigilantly until he explained himself, then seemed to relax a trifle.

“Señor Matson, we will take your biometrics now to confirm your identity.”

“Of course.”

After he had been tera-scanned, Kioga grinned.

Then the alarms sounded, louder than Armageddon.

Kioga took a step or three backwards.

“Mister Matson, stop! You are under arrest! Please come peacefully.”

Kioga was ten meters away and running before he had formed any conscious impulse.

The taser barbs caught him in the butt and lower back. He spasmed like a gaffed fish and went down, head aimed, he noted clinically, straight at a

sizable jagged roadside boulder.

* * * *

Jimmy Velvet arrived in Kioga's Parque Arví hospital room while Kioga was replaying for the *nth* time on his phone the news accounts of his embarrassing escapades. His friend beamed, carrying a bottle and several gifts. Kioga ignored him momentarily. He was too intent on marveling at what an allegedly humorous spin the announcers had managed to put on his near-fatal contretemps.

Missing person alert! Unflattering photo flashed onscreen. Last seen in dodgy native company. Anonymous accusation delivered, proclaiming sudden terrorist sympathies and affiliations in the Science Park renegade. Grudging admission by his fiancée that he might very well have gone dingo. "Just not himself lately." Then all revealed as one laughable chain of mistakes, once Kioga had been apprehended and debriefed.

Of course, Mallory's reactions hurt the most. Her swift betrayal. And then her non-apology. And when she had asked Kioga, fresh out of the ICU, to donate his sperm for an early insemination, given the unavoidable delay in their wedding—

Well, journalistic accuracy would have demanded an update to amend her status to ex-fiancée.

Jimmy set down his offerings. He unwrapped one of the packages and helped himself to a chocolate. Munching contentedly, he looked inquisitively at his friend before speaking.

"You really are a right mug, aren't you?"

"Say what?"

"A sucka. Gullible to the bone."

Kioga took offense. "I don't really think so! I just employ common human decency, and a willingness to expect the best of everyone. At least, until they show me they're malicious."

"And that naïve philosophy almost got you killed. That brain hemorrhage you incured in tumbling tasered arse over teakettle nearly did you in. It didn't help that the Conquistador guards took close to an hour to summon medics. Lots of dead neurons you could ill afford to lose. Well, perhaps that little replacement wodge of cloned cortical cells out of the vat will render you good as new!"

Kioga ran a finger along the healing surgical incision on his skull. “I certainly hope so.”

“Maybe you’ll be better than before. Less naff. I just hope there are no side effects from the new bits! Any sudden desires to crossdress? Maybe some fresh new talents emerged from the subconscious, such as the ability to speak Khmer, or to dance *en pointe*?”

Jimmy had Kioga laughing so hard, tears rolled down his cheeks. “No, Jimmy, nothing like that!”

“Splendid, then! Wonderful to have you back, more cautious or not!”

For the first time since his surgery, Kioga felt as if he might live down this dumb brush with infamy.

Jimmy forked up another sweet, and changed the subject slightly. “I take it there’s no chance of you and Mallory getting back together? Normally at such a decisive break, I’d ask how she was in the sack, in pursuit of my own interests.”

Kioga made a rueful face. “You’re welcome to her, Jimmy.”

“No, I think not, given the altogether too utilitarian and disloyal face she’s shown.” Jimmy ran a finger around one incisor to clear away some sticky caramel. “That Avianna gal, however. Another story entirely. And rich to boot! Why, she and her brother practically own Conquistador Mining now. Not to mention his patents. Even the countersuit against them for property damage and trespass was dismissed. Devilish sly. Positively Machiavellian! Sending you as a diversion, while they broke in elsewhere. Brilliant!”

“Agreed. Though being the actual catspaw makes one slightly less appreciative of their ingenuity.”

Jimmy arose. “Well, it’s all water under the bridge now. It’s not like your world will ever intersect with hers again. Cognitive homogamy rules, after all. So long, Ky. Until we next share a conference table.”

Kioga’s lunch arrived half an hour after Jimmy’s departure. The young male orderly placed the tray reverently on the bedside table and made sure to direct Kioga’s attention to it.

“Something special today, sir.”

Kioga lifted the aluminum dome off the plate. The heady aroma of salmon-and-shrimp-stuffed arepas wafted out.

And the meal came with a note in a feminine hand.

KAREN COXSWAIN

Or, Death As She Is Truly Lived

You don’t know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain’t no matter. But of course I ain’t talking about that pile of YA puke we all got shoved at us in middle school back on Earth, sometime between our first boyband crush and our first sloppy blowjob. The sappy, cornfed book that old Mark wrote in 1876. No, the *Adventures* I’m holding up as a not-totally-authentic introduction to my current life—afterlife, really—is the second one that Mark wrote—here in Hell, just a few years back.

You see, at that time, I had taken a lover onboard the *Ship of Shadows*, my first infernal beau, and after our brief honeymoon our carryings-on soon escalated to such hysterical, fucked-up, window-smashing, curses-bellowing, biting, screaming, flailing, lowblow-throwing melees, followed by makeup sex nearly as destructive and outrageous, that I began to acquire a certain seamy reputation in all the cities we regularly visited, from Beetleburg to Crotchrot. Just imagine, said all the righteously and proudly damned infernal citizens: that nice Karen Coxswain, Captain of the *Shadows*, previously such a respectable gal, consorting with a lowlife yeti from Tibet, one who had been moreover the righthand man and mystical advisor to none other than bloody Kublai Khan hisself, and who was plainly now such a bad influence on the previously serene and pleasant Captain. (Khan hisself doesn’t actually figure into my story, since he was then living in the city of Scuzzy Ashenhole about forty thousand miles away downriver, far from my stomping grounds.)

What those scandalized citizens didn’t realize, however, was that I had never really been anything like a good girl, back when I was alive. Really, if they had thought about it for even a minute, why else would I’ve ended up in Hell? I had only appeared docile and meek and mild-mannered for the past ten years, since I had been taking that amount of time to more or less mentally adjust to my death and to process my feelings about my new role in the afterlife, the job of ferrying folks from one side of the Styx to t’other, and up and down its blasted, cindery, jizz-bespattered shores.

I'll never forget my entry interview with the Marquis Decarabia, when the stinking old goat (and he was at least half goat, for along with his naked, brick-red, totally ripped human upper half, big as a Cadillac Escalade SUV, went an actual billygoat-style bottom half, and he stunk of garlic, curry powder, lanolin and Axe body spray) discovered that when I had been alive I used to work on a shrimper running out of my hometown, Apalachicola, Florida, often taking the wheel when the Captain got loaded. The *Virgin Berth*, that woulda been, under Skipper Israel Shuby, a fine man, but with a weakness for Jägermeister.

"Why, this is more than splendid!" boomed the Marquis, then belched like a thousand underwater gator-frightening swampgas farts in the deepest Everglades. "Sorry, just had a heavy lunch of banker entrails. Where was I? Oh, yes, your past maritime experience! We're right this minute in need of a cross-Styx pilot, and with the first name of Karen, you're practically destined from birth! We'll get you your 'papers' and you'll be on the water —if you can call that toxic sludge water—before a devil can shake his dick!"

And then, just to illustrate matters, he peed all over me and disposed of the last few droplets across my wet face with a vigorous waggle of his pointy goat member. Luckily, the demon piss tasted just like Kool-Aid. Unluckily, it was the world's worst flavor, Kickin' Kiwi-Lime, endless pitchers of which had been forced on me as a child by a cruel Mama Maybellene at the Home, before the Kool Aid honchos came to their senses and discontinued the raunchy flavor.

So that's how I found myself in my new Hellish job. As I say, it took some getting used to the notion that I was stuck here for all eternity, cruising these cursed waters under a smoldering sky or canopy or cavern roof that looked exactly like that kind of grey Corrections Department toilet paper made from one-hundred-percent re-re-recycled older toilet paper, which had then been used to clean up the butts of one million pureed-spinach-and-mashed-bananas-fed babies. But by the time I finally met my yeti man, I was pretty well accomodated to my new position, and ready to have me some fun.

Did I mention yet that the old horny, hot-headed 'bominable called hisself Tom Sawyer? Yup, that he did. Turns out he had met up with Twain a century ago and become good friends with the writer, glomming onto all

Twain’s books like Holy Scripture. Apparently, there was some kinda simpatico link between Twain’s brand of humor and the typical yeti way of looking at life. So whatever my hairy boyfriend’s original furriner Tibetan-Mongol name had been, he was now called Tom. And when I met up with him he used all his borrowed downhome American wit and humor to sweep me plumb off my feet.

And so as that beatup old steamer, *Ship of Shadows*, with its boilers fired by the catalyzed and condensed screams of succubi, plied its slow way up and down its few thousand assigned miles of the Styx, delivering its motley passengers to such stops as Rat’s Alley, Bone Palace, Migraine Gulch, Toadlick, Culo de Sciacallo, Twitterville, Clayface, Vuht, and Hernia House, Tom and I conducted our intense bunk-busting affair that veered all over the emotional map, from whispered sweet-nothings to black eyes and bunged-up heads. When we weren’t easing along like two Junebugs riding a leaf, all goofy smiles and hand-holding, we just grated on each other like Democrats and Republicans, or weeds and Roundup. I acknowledge I was wound pretty tight and could be kinda demanding, a go-getter with ambitions—whatever that entailed in Hell. Whereas Tom was an easy-going slacker, interested mostly in getting plenty to eat (mostly stray dockside cats, watermelons, Twizzlers and Rusty Humphries Ol’ Southern Style Beef Jerky, which I had introduced him to) and scratching his grapefruit-sized balls en route to a long nap. No way we coulda made a longterm go of our mutual thing, and I guess I knew it all along. If that sugar-tongued, Muppet-furred bastard hadn’t featured a bone inside his furry ten-inch cock, I woulda ditched him a year sooner than I eventually did.

But by the time we did finally split, our shennanigans, as I hinted at, had become somewhat notorious along both banks of my route, and somewhat inland, toward the Debatable Territories and the Impossible Zone. And that’s when Twain decided to put the two of us, thinly disguised and grossly misrepresented, inside his new *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. (And why the guy half of the romantic duo should’ve gotten star billing in the novel, I leave up to you to figure out. Men! If they didn’t hang together, we could hang them all separately!)

Mark later confessed to me, half apologetically and all puppy-dog-eyed, that he had been in a bind. He was under contract to Hades House to turn in a new novel in less than a month (having frittered away over the course of

the past year his advance of 100,000 chancres, mostly on hookers, cigars and gambling at billiards), and he was just plumb dry of ideas. That's when he hit upon fictionalizing the relationship between Tom and me. I must admit, he did a good job, however sensationalized and gossipy it turned out, and he got a bestseller out of the novel, even making enough to gift me a few thousand chancres out of guilt when I needed the dough. (And I mostly always needed the dough.)

So, long story short, that's why I say you probably haven't ever made my acquaintance personally outside the pages of some lurid book. But at the same time, my portrait in those steamy pages being so reality-show, it hardly counts even if you read the thing.

Of course, another way you mighta gotten to know me actually is if you've ridden my scow. But out of all the trillions of creatures in Hell, that number amounts to the tiniest fraction of souls. There's just so many beings in the infernal regions that the chances of any two bumping up against each other is smaller than the odds of me jilling off and cumming just at the exact second a meteor destroys Earth by landing precisely in my busy lap.

Which is why you coulda knocked me over with a feather off the Angel Jegudiel's wings the day I stood at the head of the *Shadows*' boarding plank and saw my big bruiser of an ex-husband, Jad Greenlees, strolling onboard, handsome as a dragon and twice as surly. (And I should know dragons, having had a one-night stand with a Jap one named Uwibami, on the sorrowful rebound from Tom.)

Now, last time I had seen Jad was just about three days before I died. And he had been slightly instrumental in me buying the farm. Maybe even more than slightly. Not that I held it against him anymore, having come to the realization that the fault was truly all mine. Knowing Jad as well as I did back when I was mortal, I shoulda been more careful.

The way it happened was like this.

The *Virgin Berth* was in port for a week, and I had wanted to make a little extra money. My eye was snagged by the Facebook announcement for a Demolition Derby up in Pensacola, at the Five Flags Speedway, just three hours or so down Route 98. I had done Demo Derbies before, and, if I say so, was pretty damn good at them. I figured I had a good shot at taking one of the prizes.

But right that moment, I had no suitable vehicle to enter. So I resolved to get Jad to let me take his old beefed-up Dodge Charger to compete with. It was the least he could do, seeing as how it was my earnings that had paid to kit out the car in the first place. Letting him have the souped-up beater after our divorce had been pure niceness on my part. And I knew he wasn't using it for anything anymore, since he had made some real money and bought hisself a cherry-clean 1985 IROC-Z. So over to Jad's I went.

Standing on the beatup shady porch of Jad's shack, I could hear a lot of instant frantic rustling around inside, in response to my knocking. Not wanting Jad to flush all his merchandise and then blame me, I hollered out through the ripped screen door, "Hey, shithead, it's just me!" The scrabbling and shuffling stopped, there was a whispered conversation featuring a female voice I didn't recognize and a male one I knew too well, and then my former hubby appeared on the far side of the floppy copper mesh.

Jad looked kinda like Magnum, PI—one reason I had first fallen for him—except for considerable extra inches around his middle, a chewed-up ear from a particularly evil bar fight—the same brawl what left a scar kinda like Harry Potter's birthmark on his brow—and a trademark expression of baffled confusion, irritation and suspicion arising from a far-less-than-Advanced-Placement level of intelligence.

Now he scowled. "So it's you."

"Generally I follow mighty close behind my voice, jerkoff."

"Whatta ya want? I'm busy."

"Yeah, I bet. Cutting your coke, no doubt. You're not still using that de-worming shit you stole from the vet, I hope."

Jad had the grace to look embarrassed. "Not since I lost myself several dead customers, no. Made the skin fall right offen them in hunks."

Jad's ramped-up involvement with drug dealing had been the primary reason for our splitting up. I just couldn't reconcile even my sketchy set of ethics with the stuff he was pushing. It had been all right when we first married, and he was only selling grass and Scooby Snacks. But I drew the line when he moved into bath salts and all that other deadly junk.

But all that was in the past, and any hurt or loss I felt for what we had had and thrown away was moderated by an equal sense of relief and freedom at being single again.

I explained my errand to Jad, and he brightened up, obviously relieved that I didn't want any weightier favor. For a moment I could see the fun-loving, easy-going, carefree, considerate guy I had married. Then the woman's voice called out to him to hurry up, and his attitude changed to worry and haste, pissed-offedness and anxiety. I recognized the voice.

"Is that Scamp the Tramp O'Dell in there?"

"So what if it is?"

I shook my head. "Man, Jad, I thought you had more sense and good taste than that. She is ten kinds of nasty layered on top of a heap of meanness. What can you possibly see in her?"

Jad leered. "She fucks like a cageful of tigers getting their first meat after a week's worth of carrots. And she helps me in my job."

There was nothing I could say to that, except to offer up that they truly deserved each other. Jad took it as a compliment. Then he scooted past the door, opening it just slightly as if afraid I might try to sneak inside. But nothing coulda been further from my desires.

We went out to the side yard where the Charger sat on its cinderblock-chocked trailer, covered in leaves and bird poop. I insisted on spraying the car somewhat clean with the garden hose before I took it.

"What's become of you, Jad? You used to love that car and take good care of it. Don't you give a shit about anything anymore except selling drugs?"

"That and pussy. Except not yours. Now, c'mon and hurry. I got things to do."

Burning mad and biting my tongue, I backed my old Ford Ranger up to the trailer and let Jad hitch them up without even getting out of the cab.

And that was my fatal mistake. I shoulda inspected what Jad had done.

Jad fucked up installing the safety chains. First off, they were too heavy a gauge for the load. Then he secured them not to the rig but to the frigging Charger itself! So a few days later, when I was barrelling down Route 98 and the trailer coupling separated from the ball mount on my truck after hitting a bad bump, I suddenly found myself connected to a loose, airborne automobile—the Charger—that had leaped off its runaway trailer, shredding all four tires when it landed. The drag caused my Ranger to careen from lane to lane, sideswipe the Jersey barrier, roll over, hit the pillar of a billboard, and explode in a fiery Hellball, sending me straight to my new job as Captain of the *Ship of Shadows*.

For a time I would ask myself if Jad had rigged the setup deliberately to cause my death. But ultimately I figured, Naw, it was just bad luck and circumstances. That trailer was hauling fine till we hit the bump, and there was no way Jad coulda predicted that. It was just sheer hurried incompetence on his part, and lazy inattention on mine. My death had been just fallout from his lameass haste.

So before too long into my infinite stay in these realms, I forgave Jad Greenlees for my death, and even managed to ressurect a few—very few—happy memories of our time together to comfort me occasionally in my daily rounds.

Which is not to say I did not have some mighty conflicted feelings churning inside me as I watched the big bastard climb that gangplank!

For once Jad was not swaggering. In fact, he seemed kinda bummed and stomped-down, looking like a dog what had got its boner knot caught between two fence slats. He wasn't dressed in the usual High Ghetto style he favored. In fact, I recognized the suit he wore as the kinda cheap secondhand clothes Hell handed out to newcomers, sorta like the suit prisoners got back on Earth when they were released. His head hung down and he looked only at his shuffling feet. He didn't even do a doubletake when Humbuzz, my purser, took his ticket. And if you're a human who doesn't jump when you first encounter one of the Bee People of Venus (far as I know, they lived about umpty-ump millions of years before humans even existed), then you're some kinda superman, and Jad was never that.

Once onboard Jad started to head for the ladder down to steerage, so I knew two things: he was traveling some distance, and he truly had no chancres. Nobody rides steerage if they can help it, it's so dismal and stinking, full of screaming ogre babies and their bone-gnawing parents and ignorant Neolithic shitkickers. And most passengers just crossing from one shore to the next like to stay up top and enjoy the hot, clammy, coal- and sulfur-scented breezes, for whatever relief they offer.

I felt so sorry for the boy I stepped right into his path to halt him. He bumped into me, muttered an apology, and tried to sidestep me. But I hailed him by saying, "Hey, Scarface, dontcha have any time for old friends?"

Jad looked up and, with no small effort, his expression changed from grim and glum to bogusly boastful. I almost regretted making myself known. But

if he was riding any distance, we woulda come face to face sooner or later anyhow.

Jad's voice sounded rough, as if maybe he had spent the past month of Sundays crying in his beer. "Well, sweetcakes, fancy meeting you here! I thought for sure that your holy ass woulda brung you straight to the Other Place."

"Holy ass only next to *your* sinful carcass. How'd you end up here anyhow?"

"My meth lab blew up."

That figured. Jad had trouble remembering not to nuke his tinfoil-wrapped leftovers. Putting potentially explosive chemicals in his hands was asking for disaster.

"Anybody else screw the pooch with you?"

Jad got crestfallen again. "Just Scamp."

"Oh? How come she's not lovingly by your side right now?"

Now Jad looked mad. "One of these high and mighty demons done stole her from me!"

I got the story from Jad in confused bits and pieces. Seemed like he was still in that period of disorientation and disbelief that hits everyone when they first arrive in Hell, and only evaporates when the damned soul has fully reconciled itself to its fate.

Upon their flindersization, Jad and Scamp's joint entry interview had been conducted by Supreme President and Earl Rampant Glasya-Labolas, one of the mightier potentates of Hell, who outranked my own mentor Marquis Decarabia by about several hundred thousand ass-kissings and ritual face-in-the-mud abasements. Glasya-Labolas' form was that of a giant coondog with rainbow griffin's wings, and he loomed 'bout as big as your average Redneck Riviera McMansion.

Turns out that the Earl Rampant had taken a shine to Scamp the Tramp as new meat, and she had no doubt encouraged the demon in her slutty fashion, once she saw which side of the Hell waffle had the molasses. Glasya-Labolas had done the dirty deed with Scamp right then and there in front of her outraged boyfriend. (Don't ask how a sewer-pipe-sized dog dick fits into a normal-sized human pussy; physics is mighty variable in Hell, not to mention biology.) Jad had been so enraged he had very

foolishly attacked Glasya-Labolas, all to no avail of course. Except that Jad had ended up on the demonic shit list.

Glasya-Labolas had flown away with Scamp on his back, to his castle known as Dark Epcot, about nine thousand miles downriver from where the *Shadows* was now docked. And when Jad had recovered himself and tried to fit into the Hell economy the only way he knew how, by drug-dealing, he had discovered that the only job any of the established drug lords would give him was the low-paying one of lookout or mule—quite a comedown from his mortal rank. A few months of that treatment and he had got to feeling lower and lower until about the only thing he could think to do was to voyage to Dark Epcot and apologize to Glasya-Labolas and ask to be forgiven.

This was why had had booked steerage passage on my ship.

Telling his story seemed to alleviate some of Jad's funk, as sharing troubles mostly will, even in Hell. In fact, he began to act like his old cocky self and presume on our prior connection.

"Christ, Karen, you're looking extra damn hot, like some kinda Hollywood *Pirates of the Caribbean* bitch."

I hadn't even thought twice about my outfit, but I realized after Jad commented that it was indeed pretty piratically smoking. I wore a paisley scarf tied around my hair like Little Steven on tour with Bruce. My boobs were covered with a lurex tube top in red, over which I featured an unbuttoned denim vest. My Daisy Dukes left nothing to the imagination, and I wore Vivienne Westwood ankle-high pirate boots. (A girl's got to splurge now and then.)

"Why, I guess that's about as much of a gentlemanly compliment as I could ever expect from you."

I made the mistake of smiling at Jad then, and so he felt obligated or entitled to grab my ass.

That's when I let him have it in the face with my tail.

You should picture about four feet of thick scarlet scaly garden hose, normally coiled up tight to my butt, that ends in an arrow-shaped knob of flesh about as dense as Mike Tyson's fist. I can unfurl that sucker and whip it around faster than a snake. My tail constituted those "papers" Marquis Decarabia had said he was gonna give me as token of my new job.

Jad flew back about ten feet and landed on his ass against a bulkhead. Several of my crewmembers came running. And most of them, even the humans, looked scarier than Humbuzz. They helped Jad up but kept his arms pinned. He looked dazed as a manatee in a marina.

"Humbuzz," I said, "how far does his ticket take him?"

"Fishgrunt only."

I turned to Jad. "That's not even halfway to Dark Epcot. How'd you plan on getting the rest of the way?"

Jad acted properly humble, though I knew he'd be burning up underneath. "I dunno… Work at something, I guess…"

"Well, how'd you like a job as stoker on this ship? Join the Black Gang and work your passage off. I need someone, and the experience might do you good. It's manual labor, but it's not too hard or dirty. And you get to bunk with the crew."

Jad was too dumb to be suspicious of my offer. He musta thought I was just all full of womanly pity.

"Well, okay, I suppose. Gee, thanks, Karen, that's mighty white of you."

"All right then. The boys will take you down and show you the ropes."

As Jad walked off, nursing his jaw, I had to smile again.

The boiler of the *Shadows* ran on condensed succubi screams that came in the form of gleaming silver bricks slick to the touch. Handling one brick was enough to give any male an instant hardon—and stiffen the clit of many a female too. By the end of each shift, after handling hundreds of those bricks, Jad would ache like somebody was amputating his balls with a butterknife.

His only likely partners in relieving his needs, those willing Neolithic and ogre gals in steerage, were going to have no end of Greenlees loving on this voyage.

With Jad squared away, I turned my attention to my duties. We were docked at Scrope, and due to cast off in the next half hour or so, heading cross-Styx for Halfhead. As you can imagine, schedules drift pretty regularly in Hell—demons ain't concerned with making no trains run on time—and ferry passengers come to resign themselves to reaching their destinations at any old hour, happy and satisfied with the service if arrival occurs on the same day promised.

Now, every ferry on the Styx ran a shoelace pattern: scoot diagonally across the murky waters from one settlement or town, shack or city, to the opposite bank's destination, unload and load, then angle off toward a downriver or upriver dock on the shore you had set off from just prior. Every straight mile of travel up or down the Styx was attained only by multiple miles of cross-river churning. The necessity to serve every community, however small, in this zigzag fashion meant a leisurely pace.

But that was fine with me. No pressure, no rush, just piloting *Shadows* lazily under the dirty furnace skies, thinking my thoughts, however elevated or gutter-drenched, watching for snags in the form of behemoth corpses or floating war debris, blowing the big horn to alert smaller craft, steering clear of larger ones, aware all the while that at any moment some subaquatic leviathan outta one mythology or another, flashing six heads, each sporting a mouthful of fangs big as my leg, could breach and threaten to swamp us. Every day brought news of one ferry or another stove in and capsized with greater or lesser loss of life. (Where did the dead and damned go when they died? You *really* don't want to know!) But that's why the *Shadows* boasted some sweet honking deck artillery fore and aft. That, and dealing with local Illustrissimos and Dominions who might've gotten a little too big for their goat bottoms and decided to levy some unfair taxes or kumshaw or fees. My patents from Marquis Decarabia were, document-wise, as powerful as my tail. But some small-pond jokers were just too bag-of-hammers dumb to know when to kowtow without a few hundred 50mm shells from a chaingun upside their heads.

So before much longer we were underway, sluicing through the small floating corpses and frothy fecal scum, plastic soda bottles and slicks of glowing chemicals, maneuvering just like a bottom-heavy mechanical swan paddling through a tub full of acid-wash and tie-dye colors and jeans.

Darkness never really falls in Hell, but most creatures operate on some kinda wake-and-sleep cycle that approximates Earthly days and nights. So by the time we had gone from Scrope to Halfhead, and then back across to Shriektown, it was getting on toward the end of my working day. I gave the orders to tie up for the night, made sure a watch was posted, checked that our new cargo of Trojans, gin, pineapples and roofing nails was secured, and retreated to my cabin.

On the way to my rest, I thought I heard wild yowls betokening sexual release of a mixed appreciative and flinching nature wafting up from steerage. Among the grunts and bellows and hollerings was a certain species of mating call I had come to know intimately, from being pressed beneath their source back in Apalachicola. I think my grin lit up a circle of deck planks around me.

Lying in bed on my belly (I do miss sleeping on my backside), I thought how much fun I could have accompanying Jad all the way down to Dark Epcot and witnessing his meeting with Supreme President and Earl Rampant Glasya-Labolas. My usual run of the Styx didn't extend so far, but us Captains were always swapping routes just to liven up infinity a bit, and I had no doubt I could bring the *Shadows* all the way to Dark Epcot. As sleep overtook me, I made the decision to do it.

So the next day I announced my new plans to the crew, and got a variety of reactions ranging from plain old "who-gives-a-fuck-why-are-you-even-bothering-to-tell-me-this?" to "way-awesome-dude!" None of the swabbies objected, since one quiet spot in Hell for their labors was as good as any other to them, they being mostly rootless, non-family types who had chosen this way of life precisely for its permanent migratory nature. And in fact, two thousand of the nine thousand miles to Dark Epcot were familiar territory, my last regular stop being Saliva Tree Hill.

The river beyond that, natch, was an unknown quantity to me. But how different could it be? I thought.

Jad of course stood assembled with the other hands to hear the message, and, having had one taste of my double-edged "favors," mustered up enough wits to look dubious at this large-hearted gesture. He hung back when the crew dispersed, so's he could pester me with his questions. He kept rubbing his crotch like some hip-hop star, and I almost took offense until I realized it was an unconscious reaction to being sore.

"So, uh, Karen, why the change in plans? You figure maybe that once I'm on the good side of that pissant demon canary-dog I can repay you somehow? Is that it?"

"That's exactly it, Jad." Some evil whim shaped my next words—not too uncommon a perverse happening here in Hell. "But I'm actually holding out for even more. I think you can kick Glasya-Labolas' butt and take his place."

This was exactly the kind of impossible ego-boosting bullshit Jad was primed to accept at face value. After all, his default inclination was to picture himself as the magnificent, alpha-dog center of the universe wherever he happened to be, on Earth or in Hell. That notion had just taken a little posthumous beatdown, but it was plainly bubbling under, ready to be stroked and revived.

"You really think so?" The agreeable idea took hold of Jad's whole brain, which was a process like a rising creek spilling over into a shallow ditch. "Yeah, what's that Glassy-assed Labia Lips got that I ain't got! After I learn the ropes here a little more, I can beat him at his own game, and get Scamp back. Gee, thanks, Karen, you showed me the light."

Jad limped off for his stint in the Black Gang, and I shook my head in amazement and took my own place in the pilothouse.

The next several months went by in regular, business-like fashion, as the *Shadows* slipped greasily down the Styx, from one steamy, heaving, maggot-mound burg to another. Pinchbottom, Gallbreath, Cracked Moon, Furnace Heart, Zezao, Outcast Flats, Gringo Guts, Bloody Albion, Sidereal City, Nopalgarth….

Pardon me if I get downright poetic for a minute. The lack of any kind of weather or heavenly bodies (ha!) contributed to a timeless and uniform existence, filled with an endless cycle of deeds and thoughts, just variable enough to foster some sense of living. The routine daily rituals of piloting. The steady stream of embarking and disembarking weird chittering, crawling, gesticulating passengers, so that the gangplank seemed at times like a conveyor belt with its source in some crazy deity's fevered brain and its outlet in some universal maw of destruction—which pretty much described matters as they actually stood. The occasional bouts of shore leave, when me and my crew gambled, got drunk, got laid and lost all our chancres, not necessarily in that order. The continuous transhipment of stuff, stuff, stuff, so that sometime it seemed like the hold of the *Shadows* held merely X number of stationary pallets whose transient contents morphed like a mirage.

Such was life in Hell, a hazy, lazy, crazy, dazed damnation.

About the most you can reliably say is, shit happened.

So before you knew it we were down to the outpost at the end of my usual reach, Saliva Tree Hill. About the only incident that really stood out in my

memory of that time was when we carried two bounty hunters for a few hundred miles, until they caught up with their quarry.

At the dock at Cornhole two beings came on board and sought me out to present their credentials. They called themselves Coffin Ed and Grave Digger Jones, after two human detectives outta some books by a guy named Hymie or something. Coffin Ed was pretty much a crayfish as big as a man with some kinda helper seaweed and clams attached all over him. He walked upright on his tail somehow. I didn't care to look too closely. Grave Digger Jones looked like some critters I saw in a comic book my nephew Cooter showed me once: stone men from outer space, fighting that long-haired guy with the hammer. Grave Digger did the talking cuz I'm not sure Coffin Ed could.

"Captain Karen, your gentleness, we are seeking a miscreant named Brian Passwater. We have reason to believe he is hiding downriver from Cornhole. Travel by your vessel will allow us to search for him circumspectly and relatively swiftly, as opposed to making arduous and flashy quarry-alerting peregrinations by land, up one shore only. Will you accept payment for our indefinite passage?"

"Well, lemme think a minute. How long you gonna take in each port? I can't screw up my schedule too-too much."

"No time at all, practically speaking. Coffin Ed has very acute and instant remote sensory abilities."

The big crayfish bowed toward me and waggled his antennas significantly.

"Well, okay, I guess. But I can't change my circuit to bring this perp back up here to Cornhole for justice, once you catch him."

"Do not trouble yourself over justice, Captain Karen. We are equipped and authorized to dispense it *in situ*."

Coffin Ed clacked his big serrated claws like castinets. Probably a lotta good eating in those grabbers, I thought, but I for one did not intend to get near enough to learn for sure.

So for a week or three the two bounty hunters stood like some kinda figureheads at the prow of the *Shadows*, a half circle of deferential private space always surrounding them, no matter how crowded the ship got, silent and unmoving until we approached land. Then Coffin Ed's antennas would start thrumming and vibrating like Butch Robins' banjo strings. Once or

twice they got an interesting reading and went ashore while I waited, but they always came back empty-handed. Until we hit the metropolis of Crocodile Crater. Then, with Coffin Ed's crayfish deelyboppers vibrating too fast to see they raced off into the twisty rubbish streets of the city before the gangplank was even firmly lashed down.

They returned just as I was getting ready to leave them behind, and in fact they were done with my services and only wanted to say thank you and goodbye. In his big pebbly paw, Grave Digger Jones was carrying a double-layered paper shopping bag that showed the store logo for the Hell branch of Whole Foods: a radioactively glowing tomacco fruit. The bag was dripping, and one of Coffin Ed's lethal pinchers was smeared the same color as the drippage.

"Captain Karen, we wish to inform you of the success of our venture, and hope that the unutilized chancre-redeemable portion of our tickets will serve as sufficient emblem of our gratitude."

"Uh, sure, right, boys… Happy hunting!"

I never did learn what crime poor Brian Passwater was guilty of. Probably not something really major, like offending one of the Lords of Hell. That would've brought a more vicious supernatural punishment. He musta just got on the wrong side of some powerful Hell citizen, one probably involved in some less savory line of business.

Like I say, that was pretty much the most exciting thing that happened in two thousand miles of travel. And as we pulled into Saliva Tree Hill, I wondered if the rest of the journey would be as boring. But we wouldn't begin to find out until tomorrow, because we had to wait for the arrival of Captain Nance Piebald and his ferry, *Satan's Inglorious Rapture*, in order to swap routes.

That night I had a confab with Jad. I had to say I was mighty impressed, despite our past track record of mutual hostility and incomprehension, with his new look and attitude. Work in the Black Gang had trimmed off all his excess poundage and muscled him up plenty. He seemed more self-assured and even a whit more considerate of others. I was guessing that maybe some ogre gal had objected to aspects of his callous and selfish lovemaking and undertaken to teach him some manners and perhaps even the meaning of the word "foreplay." In fact, I detected a hickey on his neck exhibiting the unique tusk patterns of that species of female. Half of my objections to

Jad as a husband had been to his egotism and unthinking brute ways, and those seem to have been smoothed off, making him a halfway attractive prospect again. Of course, as I soon learned, there had been no alteration in his intelligence or tastes, which were fixed solid as the Mason-Dixon line.

"So, Jad, we've come two thousand miles so far, with another seven to go. You had any change of heart during all that time? Maybe fancy sticking on as a member of my crew? It's not a bad ol' life, is it? Why not give up Scamp and the notion of hitting back at Glasya-Labolas?"

"Nuh-huh! That jumped-up cocker spaniel has it coming to him, and I'm just the bangtail roarer to hand him his head on a platter!"

I pondered telling Jad about some of the more excruciating tortures that the Lords of Hell reserved for upstarts like him, but his next words decided me against handing out such sensible advice.

"Besides, I want Scamp in my arms again. She is the only woman for me. She's always stood by me, and she is the best piece of tail on Earth or in Hell. That girl could peel the skin off a cucumber with that educated pussy of hers."

I blew up. "Stood by you! She ran off with the first demon she saw!"

"I been thinking hard on that. I'm sure she did it just to protect me. After all, the Earl Rampant musta known from my Earthly career how threatening I was gonna be to him, once I got my feet on the ground here. She sensed I was in danger, and so she sacrificed herself to divert him, and now she's just waiting for me to come rescue her."

I threw my hands up into the air. "You're just impossible! Go back to your green-skinned bilge trolls, you asshole!"

Jad grinned. "Sounds to me like somebody's not getting laid regular. Maybe you can get your hands on some incubi ingots."

He left laughing and I went fuming to bed.

Nance Piebald and I had met once before, but his appearance always knocked me out. A pure African black dude from some vanished kingdom called Opar, a smidgen over seven feet tall, he suffered from that disease what Michael Jackson always claimed he had, where his skin was patchy all over, fishbelly against coal. He proudly wore his native costume, which left most of his appaloosa acreage exposed, so's you could hardly miss his condition.

We shook hands at a grog shop named Ginza Joe's right on the dock at Saliva Tree Hill. Over a regular Johnstown Flood of Mount Etna Lava shots with Black Ram Ale chasers, we caught each other up on our respective beats.

"You'll want to be careful downriver from Dumpster Town," said Nance. "Prince Malphas and Queen Onoskelis are at war again."

I shuddered at that. The domains of Malphas and Onoskelis sat directly opposite each other on the Styx, and the rulers were given to lobbing bundles of flaming typhoid victims and other less pleasant material at each other's burgs, whenever they got their Irish up. Getting past them intact would be a bitch.

"Well," I said, "just have to try some of my best broken-field sailing under a flag of truce."

"Perhaps they will have ceased hostilities by the time you arrive. They are over three thousand miles away from here, after all."

"Anything else I should know?"

"There have been several incidents involving Typhon and Echidna near Hooftscarrow. It is believed the pair were mating on the river bottom—or perhaps just shifting in their sleep. Several ferries lost."

"Oh, well, we all gotta go sometime."

Nance and I clinked glasses, and then parted to assume each other's routes.

Now, to be sure, I'd like to fill up the rest of my story with all the many scary and funny and creepy and boring stuff that happened to me and the *Shadows* on our seven-thousand-mile journey downriver. But truth be told, none of it was very exceptional or interesting, at least by Hell standards. The voyage had that same kinda not-all-there quality I described earlier, like a dream of a dream. And if I've learned one thing from my friendship with Mark Twain, it's to cut to the chase.

So we steamed past Malphas and Onoskelis with no worse damage than a busted smokestack that intercepted a missile of frozen demon shit, and rode the tsunami caused by Typhon's buggery of Echidna for a quick thousand mile surfer's shortcut, and dealt with a hundred-hundred other happenings, morbid, dumb and funny. And before you knew it, we were tieing up at Dark Epcot.

Glasya-Labolas had been particularly taken with the philosophizing of Walt Disney when they met, and so had remodeled his domain along the lines of Disney's theme park. But whereas the Earthly Epcot featured pint-sized models of famous landmarks, Dark Epcot boasted recreations of famous Hell landmarks that were even *bigger* than the originals, to testify to the President Supreme's exalted status and cheese off his rivals.

Paimon's Pit of Perverted Passions. The Ninety-Nine Gibbets of Ninurta. Haagenti's Mansion of Horrors. Trump Palace. Stolos' Kitchen. Furfur's Arcade of Screaming Souls. Ziminiar's Car Wash. Okay, I know that last one might not sound so deserving of being immortalized, but take my word for it: the original was one *Hell* of a car wash!

With an enormous frontage, the domain stretched for hundreds of miles backwards from the Styx, like some kind of demonic Washington, DC: all monuments, all the time, with thousands of citizens being screwed every minute.

Jad and I walked up to one of the gates of Dark Epcot. I had instructed my second-in-command, Cheb Moussa, to leave with the *Shadows* if I didn't come back in 24 hours. I figured my chances as a simple observer of escaping the shit that was gonna fall on Jad's head were slightly better than even. Jad's odds for survival I pegged at about a trillion to one.

My ex carried one of the smaller pieces of artillery from the ferry in his arms, looking like some kinda Redneck Rambo. He kept tripping over the dangling ammunition belt, and eventually I just picked up the end of the sucker and carried it like the train of a bridal gown.

"You sure you wanna go ahead with this now?"

Sweat covered Jad's brow like brine on a freshly netted shrimp. I had to give him points for courage. If only he weren't so damn stupid and self-centered.

"I'm totally sure. What's left for me in Hell if I can't get Scamp and my pride back?"

"Okay, then, it's your second funeral."

I banged on the big riveted iron door, tall as two Nance Piebalds, one atop the other. In less than a second it swung open, and we marched in.

We were met by the most metrosexual demon I have ever seen. He wore Topsiders, skinny-leg designer jeans and a pink polo shirt that musta cost about seven hundred chancres together. He had even threaded his eyebrows,

an elegant look that was marred only by the enormous pus-filled carbuncles covering every inch of his face and neck.

"Welcome to Dark Epcot. My name is Andras, but just call me Andy. You're expected, so if you'll be so good as to just follow me… Oh, you can check your weapon with Shary over there."

A smiling human woman stood behind the counter of a large open booth. Behind her were scores of cubbies, mostly empty but some stuffed with weapons.

"Better do what he says, Jad."

Kinda flustered by this pleasant reception, Jad stowed his gun with Shary and got a claim ticket in return. Shary hoisted the huge weapon with one hand, and I was glad we hadn't messed with her.

Andy walked off at a guide's measured pace, leaving us to follow. The streets of Dark Epcot were filled with bustling minions, imps and elementals, as well as smiling tourist families. We strolled past one ginormous structure after another. I only recognized a few, chief of which was Vassago's Chamber of Excruciations. Man, you have never *seen* so many Stairmasters in one place!

Eventually we got to what could only be Glasya-Labolas' personal castle, judging by the number of spiked head adorning its walls. Many of the trophies were still talking and weeping, bitching about their fate.

Andy brought us right inside, past all the minor Lords and guards and attendants and plain-clothes security types, and before you could say "The pain of his reign stays mainly in the brain," we were left unaccompanied in the Throne Room.

Glasya-Labolas' Throne Room was about as big as Tropicana Field in St. Pete, where the Devil Rays played. At the center of it loomed the President Supreme and Earl Rampant's mighty chair, a seat made all outta bones and sinews. I could suss out Glasya-Labolas, sitting down with his big griffin's wings enfolding him like a cloak.

Gulping down our scanty spit, Jad and I walked forward.

When we had gotten to within an easy field goal's distance of the Throne, Glasya-Labolas unfolded his wings and stood up, rearing what seemed like miles high above us, and I wondered how he'd gotten so big.

Except it wasn't Glasya-Labolas, it was Scamp!

Now I have to admit, all hatred and jealousy aside, back on Earth Scamp the Tramp O'Dell had been one hot mess. Big rack, skinny waist, long legs. Hair black as a crow, heart-shaped face. Eyes that were always daring men to come after her, and challenging women to outclass her. She'd try anything once, then a few more times just to be sure she had the knack of the trick. When I knew her, she was intent on climbing to the top of any heap she happened to find herself in.

Occupying Glasya-Labolas' Throne, a jaybird-naked Scamp at fifty times her standard size looked pretty much the same as she had on Earth. Except that her knobbly skin was a dozen shades of putrid green, like something you'd find at the back of your fridge, and her nipples had eyes. She sported a mouthful of giant fangs, long thick claws on fingers and toes, a tail that put mine to shame, and gnarly bat wings with the span of what you'd expect on a 747.

When she talked it nearly made my ears bleed.

"JAD! YOU LAZY FUCKER! WHAT TOOK YOU SO LONG?"

Jad's jawbone was clacking against his collarbone, and a string of drool crept out one corner of his mouth.

"Uh, I came fast as I could, Scamp. Where—where's Gla-gla-Glasya…?"

Scamp's shriek of laughter made the dome of the Throne Room rain down cement dust.

"OH, I KEEP HIM CLOSE BY SINCE I TOOK OVER! LEMME SHOW YOU!"

I don't get grossed out that easy. But when Scamp reached down into her furry crotch and pulled Glasya-Labolas outta her twat like a tampon, I came nigh to puking.

Scamp swung the soggy comatose demon by his tail like a pendulum.

"COME JOIN ME, JAD! I GOT AN OPENING JUST FOR YOU!"

It's plumb amazing what tricks an abused memory can play on a person. How we got back to the *Shadows* I cannot say, right up to this day. I was bloody, covered with welts and scratches, and had lost most of my clothes. But I was still alive. Or after-alive.

And there was Jad beside me, in a similar condition.

I guess Scamp really couldn't be bothered with such small fry as us, given her new exalted rank.

After we had partially recovered our wits and gotten cleaned up and launched the ferry away from Dark Epcot, with Cheb Moussa at the helm, Jad and I sat on two deck chairs partaking of some well-deserved drinks.

“What next?” asked Jad.

“The Styx is a mighty big river, dude. Let’s just see what’s round the bend.”

A NIGHT IN THE THIRTEENTH AVENUE MISSION

Bright cutlery lay on clean white linen. The tines of the large and small forks curved with wordless elegance. The spatulate butter knives with pistol handles promised perfect heft. Serrated steak knives seemed eager to slice and cut. The polished bowls of the soup spoons captured the perfect interior of the restaurant in unattainable miniature.

Pastel-pink cloth napkins stood folded at the top of each sparkling plate, beside gleaming crystal wine glasses, half-full of blood-dark wine.

“So in the end,” Harry Scoon said to his dining companion, “they sold the place for twice what they paid, after holding on to it for less than eight months.”

Scoon sat back in his padded chair, evidently exhausted from rendering his complicated tale of high-finance intrigue. He rested one hand across his vest-covered paunch, as if to appease a stomach that had gone untended for more than four hours. With the other hand he reached for his glass, lifted it to overripe lips, and drank.

Mark Chambliss smiled with an insincere show of appreciation. At times, Harry could be so boring—especially when talking of these legendary big deals made by people Mark never knew—that he was painful to be with. If they hadn’t attended law school together, and formed a kind of businesslike, forced friendship under the pressures of the place, Mark doubted they would have had anything in common. And look at that gut Harry was developing— It was eating in places like this every day that did it. Mark reflexively placed a hand on his own trim waist, calculating how much extra workout time this meal would cost him later tonight.

The two men sat amid the supper crowd at Streets of Gold, a popular spot in the renovated South Street Seaport, not far from the east end of Wall Street. Waiters dressed nearly as expensively as the customers moved with grace and precision among the close-packed tables. Overloud laughter, the clink of glass and silver, and the almost palpable tension generated by a frenzied scramble for conversational points created an atmosphere that made rational thought impossible. Outside the restaurant’s windows, immaculate, purposeful men and women crossed the quaint cobblestones.

Scoon set down his glass, now nearly empty. He motioned toward Mark's. "What's the matter? My taste in vintages no good? Drink up, boy. We're not in our offices now."

"No, we're not," Mark agreed. "But I do have to return later and get some work done."

"Ah, I forgot," Scoon said melodramatically. "The probity of a public servant. How is life under the eye of our illustrious DA these days? Prosecuted any good sex offenders lately?"

Hot bile filled Mark's throat. What right did Harry have to make fun of his work? Sure, it wasn't so glamorous or so lucrative as working for a national firm with four hundred sixty-two other unscrupulous threepiece-suited sharks. But didn't conviction and a desire to do good count for something?

"As a matter of fact," Mark said with restraint, "we're handling a very interesting corruption case now. Some big names are going to take a fall on this one."

Scoon perked up, sensing blood. "Among whom are—?"

Mark briefly enjoyed the uncommon feeling of power, then immediately felt guilty over even such an innocent bit of boasting. "I can't say. You know that. I couldn't risk jeopardizing the investigation."

Smiling superciliously, Scoon relaxed his alertness, toyed idly with a knife. "Still the Boy Scout, I see. Well, perhaps one day you'll learn. Altruism is a dead-end, Mark. No payback from it. Eventually, you'll stop wasting all your energy in futile do-gooding and make something of yourself. You know that with my recommendation, Wharton, Kline and Lambert would take you on anytime."

Mark was stopped from spilling out a scathing dissertation on the pedigree of Messrs. Wharton, Kline and Lambert—which wouldn't have really damaged his friendship with Scoon, who frequently said worse things about his employers, in a way that revealed pride and envy in their perfidy—by the approach of the waiter with their meal.

The polite silence which ensued allowed time for Mark's anger to bleed away, and afterwards Scoon was too busy eating to respond to talk.

At meal's end, Scoon sat back with a suppressed belch followed by a deep sigh. He took a pack of Dunhills from his inside jacket pocket, searched for matches and came up empty.

Mark, who didn’t smoke, nonetheless patted his pockets automatically. Before he could disappoint Scoon even in such a small way, their observant waiter had come forward with a lighter. But the unintended search of his coat had turned up a folded piece of paper, and Mark recalled that he had meant to show it to Harry.

Taking out the grimy sheet of paper, Mark said to Scoon, “Here’s a curiosity for you. A cop I know found it on a poor bum who died of exposure. He was going to throw it away, but it caught my interest, and I asked him if I could keep it.”

Mark unfolded the quartered sheet and proferred it to Scoon, who took it with evident reluctance between two fingertips. He read it quickly, then tossed it to the tabletop, where it lay like a macroscopic piece of New York soot. The paper bore this message:

HOMELESS IN MANHATTAN?
COLD? TIRED?
NO PLACE TO SLEEP’?
COME TO THE
THIRTEENTH AVENUE MISSION
FOOD—CARE—SAFETY
NO CATCHES
NO QUALIFICATIONS
NO DEMANDS

“So what?” Scoon demanded. “Just another soup-kitchen of some sort. Evidently the bum who had this paper never made it there. Why’d you even bother to save it?”

“You don’t see anything strange about it? For instance, where’s the address?”

“All right, so there’s no address. These things spread by word of mouth. I’m sure every baglady and wino in the city knows where this place is.”

“What about the name?”

“What about it?”

“There is no Thirteenth Avenue in Manhattan.”

Scoon paused a moment, as if checking the internal map of the city that every resident possessed. “Okay. There’s no Thirteenth Avenue. I repeat: so what? It’s a fanciful name, dreamed up by some preacher or social-worker. You know, like Stone Soup or something.”

Mark shook his head. “I don’t think so. There’s been no publicity about this place that I’ve seen. Isn’t news coverage the first thing a mission like this would go after, to get funding and volunteers? No, I get a feeling there’s more to this than what we see on the surface.”

Scoon laughed like a sick crow. “Don’t you have anything better to occupy your mind? Don’t waste your time thinking about it. Listen, this city is full of unexplainable things that could drive you nuts if you let them. Try concentrating on the important issues: women, money, real estate.”

As Scoon sucked in an enormous lungful of smoke and immediately released it in a noxious cloud, Mark took up the paper, refolded it and stowed it away.

If he had ever considered leaving the mystery of the creased and spotted broadside unsolved, Scoon’s words and tone had irrevocably committed him to finding the answer.

Outside, the happy, well-fed, clean-clothed citizens strolled.

* * * *

Forty-second Street exuded a tawdriness more clammily repellent than the cheapest carnival that had ever crept into town under the cover of dusk. The once-grand theaters reduced to showing sex-films and karate-flicks; the peep-shows and live-sex acts; the filthy fried-chicken restaurants with their shapeless batter-crusted lumps cooling on grease-stained paper. And the people who thronged it: shuffling old men wearing two or three shabby overcoats apiece; kids offering “coke-hash-smoke” as if it were one item; epicene dollboys and fat black whores in torn nylons and vinyl miniskirts; the disaffected, the abandoned, the unloved.

The very sidewalks seemed stained with the oily perspiration of human suffering. Pairs of cops patrolled with hardened intensity.

Mark strode quickly down the Deuce, a member of the suited and shoe-shined minority. Work was over, and he was determined to spend some time investigating the curious paper he had shown Scoon at supper.

Why he should be so intrigued by the puzzle, he couldn’t say. Scoon’s scorn had been only the catalyst that had firmed up a resolve that had been steadily growing since the message came into his hands.

He had always been a sucker for lost causes, though. Even his unconscious choice of Forty-second Street as his path west, he realized,

reflected his fascination with the down-and-out in society, the losers and hard-luck cases. And his choice of careers—well, there was material for a year's worth of psychoanalysis. Why did anyone chose to labor in the masochistic vineyards of public prosecution, after spending all that money and time and energy on an education in law? Was he really still guilty about his parents' wealth? Must every summer spent in Martha's Vineyard be repaid by a season in hell?

Who could say? Certainly not the man most closely involved.

Shrugging his shoulders, Mark continued down the strip.

Once he crossed Ninth Avenue, he left the worst of the sleaze behind. Now he was surrounded only by raw poverty and desperate entrepreneurial struggles to stay afloat: mom-and-pop groceries, furniture stores where all the goods looked excavated from Ur, resale clothing shops. Here too, human misery was evident in the people: homeless crones shouting obscenities at the uncaring sky; bored teenagers feeding videogames; sidewalk vendors peddling secondhand household trash spread on dirty blankets.

After three more long blocks, he found himself down by the Hudson, on Twelfth.

The last avenue before the water.

Mark stopped.

Where was Thirteenth Avenue, and its mission?

Before him the Hudson surged, an oil-slicked, litter-flecked moat separating the relative greenery of Jersey from the grey of Manhattan. A couple of blocks north, to his right, the West Side Elevated Highway began, running north above Twelfth like a concrete canopy. Nowhere, however, was there sign of an avenue on the far side of Twelfth.

Where should he turn now? He knew that south of his position, Twelfth petered out and Eleventh became the westernmost street. Surely the mysterious Thirteenth could not be there. No, if it existed at all, it must be north of him.

Mark crossed Twelfth, putting himself on the far side of the Elevated, to be as close to the waterfront as possible, and headed uptown. He passed the *USS Intrepid*, looming at its museum dock like a steel bird of war. He idled by the Pier Exposition center, where a trade-show had attracted buses and crowds of jewelry salespeople. He watched the tourists lined up to ride the

Circle Line boats around the island. Before burned-out and devastated warehouses he paused, wondering at the secret wars of commerce, the shifting tides of trade, responsible for wreaking such casualties. The Sanitation Department garages hummed with activity, huge garbage trucks lumbering in and out of the gates like scabrous white elephants.

All along his route, the Hudson slopped among its piers and pilings like an uneasy beast.

Eventually, at Fifty-ninth Street, he reached a dead-end. A tall chainlink fence, topped by barb- and razor-wire, surrounded the Conrail yards, a vast desolate weedy tract slated to become housing and stores at some indefinite future date. Mark knew the geography north of these yards: Riverside Park, the Cloisters, Fort Tryon, Inwood Hill Park… No Thirteenth Avenue lurked there.

Baffled, he turned up Fifty-ninth, which ran under an arch supporting the Elevated. The arch was the elaborate product of another era, proclaiming itself with cement inscriptions and decorative motifs as if it were still a proud portal to a bustling waterfront, instead of a dismal gate to nowhere.

Mark felt it mocked him somehow with its witless pride.

* * * *

It was going to be a hard autumn and winter for the homeless. Already, in October, a cold snap had caused the various private and public shelters around the city to become overloaded, forcing them to turn people away. Every morning, during his jog in Central Park, Mark saw men and women lying on benches, rolled up in ragged sheets of foam, like that used underneath wall-to-wall carpeting, only their heads and feet protruding. On the way to work, he saw more of the destitute huddled in his subway stop, glad for the warm stenchy air. On the streets at lunchtime, he noticed them in plazas and parks, soaking up the pale autumnal sunlight as if to hold it through the long night to come.

Of course, all this was nothing new. There had been unhoused souls in the city as long as the city had existed. One could not help but be confronted with them every day. The fellow shaving himself with a disposable razor, a shard of mirror and a coffee can of dirty water; the woman pushing her shopping-cart full of worthless possessions and rehearsing affronts she had

suffered; the old man without shoes scavenging cans from the trash for a nickel apiece.

Institutions and charities struggled valiantly but futilely to help the tide of wanderers. But it was like trying to drain the sea with a straw. More surged in than could be handled. And the average taxpayer cared too little about them to be bothered funding institutions at the necessary level.

Mark, with his particular bent of mind, had always had more of an eye for these hapless men and women than most people did. He carried pocketsful of change for handouts, kicked in sizable amounts to the United Way, and had spent a month of weekends helping renovate a church hall to dormitory housing. But even so, since he had chanced upon the flyer for the elusive Thirteenth Avenue Mission, his attention had focused on the homeless to an unnatural degree. Unable to find the Mission, and its attractive promise of FOOD—CARE—SAFETY (and why did this promise seduce him so; did he not have these things in abundance already?), he had fastened on those who surely must patronize the Mission regularly, assuming that it even existed.

Which assumption he made with an unwavering force that was beginning to border, he feared, on monomania.

So far, Mark had not found the nerve to actually question any of the homeless as to the whereabouts of the Mission. Used as they were to being harassed and ripped-off, they would be suspicious and reticent. Instead, he mulled over vague plans of following one of them at the start of chilly dusk to the hidden Mission. But which of the many shambling figures would lead him there? Surely not everyone ended up on Thirteenth Avenue. The full-capacity load of the other places told him that. And what would he do when he got there? Ask to be admitted? Why? Had his identification with the luckless progressed so far?

Only when the second Mission flyer was thrust upon him by the dying bum did Mark realize he had to act shortly, or simply fail to ever solve the mystery.

* * * *

Early morning in the fresh-smelling Park. Gravel crunched beneath Mark’s sneakers and his breath came hard. Soon sunlight would slant through the colored leaves, fall in cool lozenges upon the path. Mark

rounded a curve and saw the Carousel, closed at this hour and season. Its gaily painted doors with horse bas-reliefs were a welcome sight, halfway point of his run.

A gaunt apparition appeared from nowhere, stumbling into Mark's path. Unable to stop in time, Mark ran into him, and both crashed to the ground.

Mark recovered quickly, and came to his knees. The other man lay still, as if afraid to move. His wild eyes were open, staring into the leafy canopy. His bristled face was emaciated. He wore a ragged assortment of castoff clothing, caked with streetgrime, twigs and soil. The soles of his shoes flapped open with unintended comicality. He smelled of urine and wine.

"Are you okay?" Mark asked. The question seemed to free the man from his bondage. His limbs flapped around in an ungainly fashion, but failed to aid him to rise. His thick tongue protruded and wet his cracked lips.

"Gotta get there," he croaked. "Gotta get there, just found out, gotta get there, can't miss it—" His broken litany suddenly ceased. A grimy hand came up and clutched Mark's sweatshirt. The other sought to push a crumpled paper into his face.

"Take me there—" the man urged. Before Mark could reply, the man stiffened, then began to thrash in an epileptic fit. His wild buckings tossed Mark off. When he finally stopped, Mark sought with trembling fingers inside his mouth to insure he hadn't swallowed his tongue, then went to find an emergency phone. The man's breathing was shallow and rapid.

By the time the rescue squad came, the man was dead.

Mark had pried the paper from his fist before the medicos could find it. The message read:

ANNOUNCING THE CLOSING
OF THE
THIRTEENTH AVENUE MISSION
LAST FIVE DAYS
NOVEMBER 8-12

* * * *

Mark finished relating the disturbing event in the Park to Harry Scoon. His mouth was excessively dry, and he drained his glass of water, waiting for Scoon to give his opinion.

Scoon's expression was unusually solemn. Hardly a trace of his natural cynicism showed through. He regarded Mark quietly for a moment before

he spoke.

“Listen, what’s the matter with you?” he finally asked. “I don’t like what’s happening to you lately. You’re letting this whole foolish matter assume more importance than it deserves. It’s unhealthy to pay so much attention to these dregs and scumbags. Who cares what’s happening at some crummy flophouse?”

Mark said nothing, and Scoon leaned forward, elbows on the table, as if to fix Mark with his intensity.

“Did you take my remarks last time as some sort of challenge? I never meant them as such. You know my way of talking better than that.”

“No, it’s nothing you said,” Mark admitted reluctantly. “It’s something that’s been building up in me for a long time. I don’t particularly like my job, or my life. I feel guilty all the time, like an impostor or hoaxer. Why do I deserve what I have, when others are so bad off? I can’t explain it, Harry. It’s just what I feel. Maybe it’s what all these other people wandering the streets went through before they hit the skids.”

Scoon sat back and lit a cigarette, puffed and considered. “This is what you do. Take a vacation somewhere out of this fucking city. Having that bum die on you was enough to shake anyone up. When you come back, I promise I’ll have the answer to this place. I’ll use all my connections to find out about it. When you see that’s it’s nothing but another Salvation-Army-type setup, you can dismiss it from your mind. You’ll see there’s nothing there for you.”

“But it’s closing,” Mark said. “It’ll be too late.”

“Just do what I say,” Scoon said.

Mark suddenly deflated, all energy gone from his shaking frame. He nodded in submission.

But he and Scoon both knew he lied.

* * *

In front of the Plaza Hotel, limos pulled up and disgorged men in tuxes and women in furs. The Park’s horse-drawn carriages clattered by, bearing tourists to snapshot immortality. Late-shoppers poured from Bergdorf-Goodman bearing boxes and bags.

Mark walked through the night along Central Park South, heading west. Wearing jeans and a leather jacket, he felt out of place among the well-dressed crowds pouring from the hotels and restaurants along the street.

Had he come down here any other night, he too would have been costumed as they were. But not tonight.

Tonight he had another destination, impossibly further than any they could conceive.

Cutting into the Park, Mark wandered down paths ill-lit by the stray unbroken lamp until he came to a cluster of benches that held a serried rank of slumped shadowy shapes.

He flopped down at the end of one bench, prayed that his day's worth of stubble and ratty running sneakers looked convincingly streetwise.

No one spoke to him, or took overt notice of his presence. Mark sat in unconscious imitation of the others, legs extended into the path, shoulders hunched against the cold.

For six hours or more, no one spoke. There sounded only the wracking phlegmy coughs indicative of untended ills, and the rumble of empty guts.

Mark had plenty of time to think.

He found he had no thoughts.

At last, around two in the morning, the forms on the benches began to move. One by one they came to their feet and shuffled off toward the west, never bunching or clumping, which would have attracted undue notice.

When Mark's turn to rise came, he found his legs stiff as bowling pins. Somehow, he endured the pain and stood. Hurrying to keep the man ahead of him in view, he moved on his awkward legs through the deserted Park.

At Columbus Circle, his guide went south, around the Coliseum, then picked up Fifty-ninth at Ninth.

Gradually, they left all mundane crowds behind, moving with agonizing slowness down meaner and meaner streets.

Now the number of people all heading in the same direction became apparent.

When they reached the huge dirty grey brick ConEd generating station at Fifty-ninth and West End Avenue, its tall stack like a prophet's finger pointing to a just heaven, the multiple threads of streetpeople from all over the city had gathered into a writhing knot of unwashed flesh.

Mark couldn't tear his eyes from the crowd ready to submerge him. There was a giant black man wearing only vest and running pants, his hair in matted dreadlocks. There were bagladies toting tattered shopping bags from

designer boutiques. A teenager in ripped Army jacket and camouflage pants leaned against an old man with rheumy eyes and a hacking cough.

And still they poured into the intersection, swarming, Mark knew, from all over the city which had turned its back on them. From the restrooms in Penn and Grand Central Stations they came. From Central Park and Morningside Heights, from the Lower East Side, the Bowery, Bryant Park and Washington Square. From Grand Army Plaza, beneath the Brooklyn Bridge, Chelsea Park, Union Square and the Port Authority Terminal. Every rough grating moist with life-giving steam and rubble-filled doorway that cut the cruel wind had given up its inhabitants for the night.

For a fraction of a second, Mark hesitated before plunging into the reeking, shivering mass. Then he abandoned all conceits of difference and surrendered himself to their herd-warmth.

How long, he wondered, would it be before a police-cruiser came by, and the riot started?

Movement surged through the crowd, and Mark was borne along with it. Straining on tiptoe, he saw that he was being carried toward the fence enclosing the Conrail yards. Surely they didn’t intend to scale that vicious razored barrier—

When Mark reached the fence, a portion of it simply wasn’t there. An irregular opening gaped, its edges melted as if by heat.

The crowd surged through the portal, fanned out across the grassy acreage, heading toward the river.

The Hudson. Thirteenth Avenue.

Mark followed, his will no longer his own.

Behind, the last of the homeless had come through. Silently the fence reformed in a blast of light.

Not a car had come by during the whole time, as if the traffic lights had conspired to hold them back.

Stumbling blindly across the unlighted, rock- and rubbish-strewn lot, Mark knew he liad to reach the river, although he couldn’t have said why.

He crossed with the others a maze of tracks, cinders whispering unintelligible truths beneath his feet.

By the weedy riverbank he stopped, a line of his fellows extending to left and right. As he watched, each of them was enveloped in a scintillating

golden nimbus. Looking down at his own limbs, he saw himself similarly encased.

Then they entered the river.

Their new skins gave them negative buoyancy, and they walked out along the sloping riverfloor to the center of the Hudson. They turned north, forming a line like an amber necklace threaded with black water, and continued walking.

Their glowing integuments allowed them to see for some distance around them. Wrecked and weed-wrapped cars, some with skeletal occupants, littered the bottom. Trash of every description—girders, washing machines, slabs of concrete—impeded their progress, caused them to scramble and weave. Still they wended their way upstream, human fish heading for ancient spawning grounds.

Mark felt neither happy nor sad. All emotions had been temporarily denied him.

In the distance, a grouping of lights appeared. As Mark neared it, it assumed the form of a fiery castle or arcane vessel, mired in the riverbottom muck. Its myriad windows glowed with radiance unlike any he had ever seen before.

The line entered through a seemingly solid wall, their bubbles merging through the side of the building-ship.

Once he was in, a sense of wellfed healthiness pervaded him, a suffusion of good spirits that banished all cares. He felt sane for the first time in his life, as if all his mad past had been cut away by an invisible knife. It struck him as such a wonderful thing—him, who knew lesser comforts as a matter of course—that he wondered how the miserable streetpeople could stand the joy. At the same time, he felt his body dissolving, his corporeal self melting away with the bodies of all the rest. All his senses fled: vision, touch, hearing. He was a disembodied presence floating in a primordial soup, having surrendered his constituents, his carbon and water and trace elements, to the needs of his new benefactors.

How his self still existed, he couldn’t imagine.

After a period without measure, he came to sense the selfhood of all the others. They began to blend with his in a spontaneous meld, each one giving up his loneliness to share in the general happiness.

Mark’s senses returned, but now they were located in the skin and interior of the castle-ship. He felt the cold water of the Hudson brush his sides, saw through the murky waters right up to the stars that glowed above. Access to an inner clock informed him, impossibly, that it was still the same night he had entered.

A glorious piping music began to fill his new ears. The communal voice of the human meld began to soar in song. From some former part of their new self came the thought: *Hamelin, and the rats.*

Mark thought back agreement as he felt the ship begin to lift from the riverbed, ascend toward the sky.

Right. But this time the rats are being left behind.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

In the late 1980s, I had occasion to spend a fair amount of time in New York City, with nothing to do but walk the streets in search of knowledge and adventure. I was accompanying my partner Deborah Newton on her assignments as a freelance editor at *Vogue Knitting*. During her office hours, I occupied myself with these expeditions, till I had traced my paths in ballpoint ink on a sweat-wrinkled map to the point of tattering the document. The knowledge gained from these pleasant peregrinations was invaluable and omnipresent. Adventures such as the one in this story were less easily found, and so had to be contrived on the page.

PS: Another period alert: people once actually could smoke in public establishments! And Times Square really was exceedingly seedy.

I KANT CUZ I’M TOO JUNG

“Do you remember,” asked Pennypacker, “the thumbless children?”

“Indeed I do,” Jearl replied. “And a good thing we ditched them before the University found out.”

Sitting in Pennypacker’s office, drinking something noxious and green from bell-shaped flasks, the two men presented a glaring contrast: Pennypacker tall and cadaverous, looking like a puppet assembled from the bones of a dozen species; Jearl thick and lumpy, as if constructed from poorly mashed potatoes. Each man wore a white labcoat on front to rear, the buttons in back misdone, causing the garments to ride up crazily.

“I can’t forget what high hopes we had for that one,” Pennypacker continued. He seemed nostalgic today, as if contemplating past glories that would never come again. “We were going to settle once and for all the role of an opposable thumb in the development of man’s intelligence. We set up the orphanage with some of our grant money, and you hired the staff from the Salvation Army residence halls.”

“Very tractable they were, too,” Jearl said. “As long as they got their daily shots.”

“A few discreet whispers among the indigent members of the city, and the children began pouring in. I feel it’s a shame, by the way, this lack of morality among the young today, thinking nothing of rutting like guinea pigs, and relying on science to handle the consequences.”

Jearl burped agreement.

“In any case, we had our subjects. Once we reached a critical mass, so to speak, of infants, it was the work of only a day to dethumb them. Then, it would have been a simple matter of sitting back and observing our little community, to see whether they developed intelligence as we define it.”

“But the police came,” Jearl said morosely.

Pennypacker pounded a knobby fist on his desk. “How were we to anticipate one of those hysterical young women might want her baby back? What nerve! Laymen have no conception of what true science demands. Luckily, our hands were clean in the whole affair. Imagine if we hadn’t taken those precautions I insisted upon— Where would our careers be today? As it was, they came damnably close to catching us. The newspapers

didn’t let the story fade for a whole year. Reporters sniffing even around the campus.”

Jearl shifted his lumpy bulk uncomfortably in the visitor’s chair. Pennypacker’s mood had infected him now too. “It seems that the era of great science is past, Pennypacker. Imagine Pavlov or Mengele struggling under these conditions. Begging for funds, complying with the EPA and genetic-engineering watchdog committees, lecturing pointy-headed proto-yuppies, whose vision extends no further than a six-figure income. How are men of our insight and daring supposed to advance the cause of science with such petty restrictions?”

The two men sat silently for a time, contemplating injustice and the fickleness of the world.

At last Pennypacker slammed his desk again. “We can’t despair, Jearl! The future stretches before us, beckoning. Don’t we have our minds, our hopes? Surely there’s territory left to conquer. Let’s reason about this.”

“You know my feelings about reason, Pennypacker. It’s never gotten us anywhere. It’s our instincts we have to rely on. As Jung said, ‘The great decisions of human life have as a rule more to do with the instincts and other mysterious unconscious factors than with conscious will and well-meaning reasonableness.’”

“Don’t quote that charlatan in my office, Jearl. My thoughts on the subject are fixed. Reason and logic are what separate man from the animals. Take a supreme rationalist such as Kant—whom you would do well to study, Jearl. What did he recommend? Intensive scrutiny of one’s every action, to determine all its consequences. ‘Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.’ A fine mess we’d be in if I had let you rely on your instincts with the orphanage. ‘We should appear on television,’ you said. ‘Publicize ourselves.’ Hah! We would have publicized ourselves right into a jailcell.”

Jearl composed his crevassed face into lineaments of hurt and distress. “Get in touch with your shadowside, Pennypacker, and you won’t be so miserable to be around.”

“Bah! Rubbish! Look at your actions in the light of the Categorical Imperative, Jearl, and recognize your flaws.”

“I’m sick of this argument,” Jearl said petulantly. “We always have it when we’re in between experiments. I wish there was some method to settle

it, one way or the other."

Pennypacker shot to his feet, as if his strings had been pulled. "Jearl, you've hit upon it! Our next conquest! We'll answer the question that has plagued mankind since it crawled from the slime. Which approach to life is more beneficial? Brain or heart, thought or feelings, rationality or instincts!"

Like pudding, Jearl rumbled up excitedly out of the chair. "Classical or jazz, Asimov or Vonnegut, PBS or ABC!"

"Exactly!"

Jearl's smile faded then, and he asked, "But how?"

Pennypacker advanced to his friend and put a bony arm around a suety shoulder. "The brain is an open book today, Jearl. Out of a hundred neurotransmitters, surely we can adjust a few to achieve a person who relies solely on either rationality or instincts. Then, we monitor his life, and objectively determine which way brings more success."

Jearl looked skeptical. Pennypacker bent low and whispered, "Dopamine."

Wistfully, Jearl said, "You hope o' mine."

"Serotonin."

"Got me moanin'."

The two joined hands and began to dance around the office, knocking furniture and files.

"Norepinephrine."

"Causes such a scene."

"Acetylcholine."

"Gets you nice and mean."

"GABA."

"Makes me jabber."

"Glycine."

"Could turn *me* lean!"

Laughing, the two collapsed into their seats.

First to recover, Pennypacker said, "Let's get busy."

Three weeks later, they sat once more in the office. On the desk between them stood two vials filled with clear fluid. One was marked with a black label, the other white.

“That didn’t take too long, did it?” Pennypacker said. “Without the computer simulations and molecule modeling, we’d still be at it. I suppose this decadent age has a few benefits. Now, we need to decide who runs the first trial. I nominate your serum for the initial test.”

“Not so fast,” Jearl said. “You’re hoping something goes wrong, and I have to discount my results. No, you go first.”

Pennypacker shrugged. “You wound me, Jearl. That was not my intention at all. I have faith in my chemistry, even if you don’t. There’s no advantage to going last. I’ll be proud to begin this experiment.”

“Aren’t we forgetting something?” said Jearl.

“What’s that?”

“The subject.”

Pennypacker waved his hand. “Not to worry. Remember the words of one of the greatest science popularizers of all times, Jearl.”

“Which are?”

“There’s a subject born every minute.”

* * * *

Kirsten James walked briskly across the campus, her mind beset by problems. If her problems could have been objectively ranked—always a doubtful proposition—the top three might have been:

1) Arthur.

2) Money.

3) Grades.

But not necessarily in that order.

At least, she thought gratefully, as she reached the steps of the biology building, money won’t be a problem much longer.

After all, the ad in the campus paper had promised a thousand dollars for just two weeks work.

She hoped fervently that she would get the position. They only needed one subject, though. But a friend on the staff of the paper had tipped her off in advance, and she was certain to be the first applicant.

Tripping lightly up the stairs, Kirsten wondered what the nature of the work would be.

On the third floor, she came to the office mentioned in the ad. Two silhouettes—one tall and skinny, the other short and lumpish—moved on

the frosted glass as if in a dance. Kirsten supposed it was a trick of the late afternoon sunlight. She knocked. The shadows stopped abruptly, separated and disappeared. A shuffling of chairs sounded. A voice came:

"Enter, please."

Kirsten opened the door and went in.

Behind a standard professorial desk sat the man who had obviously cast the elongated shadow. His labcoat was all disordered, rucked up somehow around his neck. To the side, barely fitting in a big chair, a second man sat, identically dressed.

"Ah, my dear, come in, come in," the tall man said. "My name is Pennypacker, and my esteemed associate here is Jearl. I assume you are responding to our solicitation for a subject to aid us in our latest work."

"Yes, I am," Kirsten said. Were they wearing their coats backwards?

"Wonderful. You're the first, and hence undoubtedly the best qualified. We merely have to ask you a single question concerning your epistemology, before making a final decision."

"My what?"

Jearl spoke up. "Don't take offense, Miss. We refer merely to your philosophy regarding knowledge. Do you favor rational thought over intuition, or vice versa?"

Kirsten pondered the question for trick implications, could discern none, and thought it best to answer honestly.

"Well, I try to apply both in my life. I mean, if you don't listen to your heart, where are you? But on the other hand, it pays to look before you leap."

Pennypacker clapped his hands together. "Marvelous! I could hardly have found two cliches more suited to express the attitude we are seeking in our subject. You're hired! Here is five hundred dollars up front, for the first trial."

Advancing around the desk, Pennypacker stuffed the bills in Kirsten's purse.

"Hey, wait a minute. I need to know a little bit more about this experiment before I agree. Don't you want my name, at least, and some references?"

"Nonsense. We trust you implicitly. Your word is your bond, we are sure."

"But I haven't agreed yet! What are my responsibilities? Is this gonna cut into my free time a lot? I'm carrying a full course-load this semester."

“Your duties are minimal. We wish you to live your life exactly as you have been doing, merely keeping a diary for us of your inner reactions to the drug and how it alters your decision-making faculties.”

“Drug! Hey now, the ad didn’t say anything about drugs. I don’t smoke, drink or do dope. This isn’t the sixties anymore, you know.”

Pennypacker dismissed Kirsten’s fear with a suave gesture. “The solution you will receive is simply a mix of chemicals already present in your brain. It’s one hundred percent natural. Just like NutraSweet. Now if you will kindly submit to Jearl for a moment—”

Somehow, Jearl had come up behind her with impossible stealth. Now he pinioned her arms. She watched as Pennypacker took out a hypodermic and filled it from a glass vial bearing a white label. He advanced on Kirsten with an odd smile.

“You should be grateful,” Jearl said from behind her. “Before we solved the problem of getting past the blood-brain barrier, we used to have to drip the solution directly onto the cortex.”

Kirsten fainted.

* * * *

“—two tickets.”

His speech concluded, Arthur Hennepin stared longingly at Kirsten, his moony face nearly bisected by his broad smile. The couple sat at a food-speckled table in the cafeteria. Arthur was rather pudgy, with thin blond wisps of hair straggling across a spot of premature baldness. His major was accounting, his minor subject ornithology. Kirsten’s girlfriends frequently demanded to know what a beauty of her caliber saw in Arthur. She would patiently explain that they had known each other since elementary school, that Arthur was “sweet and devoted” and that he would someday make a good salary, at his longed-for job: keeping the books for the Audubon Society.

But her girlfriends would always persist: “Isn’t he dull as dust, though?”

And Kirsten, honestly forced to reply “Yes,” was lately beginning to have her doubts about Arthur.

However, at this minute she had much more on her mind than Arthur’s lack of stimulating qualities.

Those two screwy guys—exactly what had they done to her, and what was she going to do about it? Imagine their nerve, injecting her with some untested drug without her permission! Yet, hadn't she tacitly agreed to participate when she hadn't immediately rejected their money? It was all very confusing. Why not give them the benefit of the doubt? Perhaps they were just eager to come up with some new wonder drug that would benefit all mankind. She suspected scientists got carried away occasionally with their enthusiasms. Take that Sagan fellow, for instance. Why, sometimes he seemed almost frothing— And the drug seemed to have no adverse effects —yet.

Kirsten opened her pocketbook, verified that the money was indeed there, and decided to go along.

"Kirsten," Arthur said with an impatient whine, "I don't think you've heard a word I've said."

"Of course I have, Arthur," she replied, although truthfully, she hadn't. In fact, the whole trip across campus to the cafeteria was somewhat hazy in her mind, and she seemed to be having trouble concentrating. Perhaps she had been a little hasty in discounting the effects of the drug.

Kirsten took Arthur's hand and squeezed it. His smile threatened to wrap around his ears. "I'm sorry, Arthur. Maybe I was a little distracted. Would you mind running things by me once again?"

"Well, since you've been saying lately that we don't do anything exciting, I gave it some thought, and decided, what the hell, let's splurge. So I managed to buy two tickets to the concert tonight. You know, that guy you like." Arthur made a face. "Davey Zowie, or whatever his name is."

Kirsten squealed. "David Bowie! You managed to get tickets! Oh, Arthur, how did you do it? That concert was sold-out weeks ago."

Arthur looked smug. "Oh, I just found a scalper—"

Suddenly Kirsten's brain shifted into hyperdrive. The room seemed to collapse into a pinpoint of light and disappear, while her thoughts raced with nanosecond precision and silicon clarity.

Scalper. Tickets bought unethically in blocks. Eager consumers deprived of their fair chance. Prices jacked up. Unhappiness. Unfair. What if everyone scalped? Chaos, despair, young girls slitting their wrists, Bowie finding out and feeling responsible, becoming too distracted to sing. Patronize a scalper? No!

The whole process took less than a second. Kirsten came out of the intensely rational state, back to the noisy room. Wow, what had all that been about? She had never experienced anything like that before. She shook her head. Maybe she could just ignore it.

Arthur studied her with puzzlement. “Aren’t you excited, Kirsten? Don’t you want to go?”

Kirsten opened her mouth to say how glad she was, when a new sensation struck. It felt rather similar to constipation, only it was located directly behind the bridge of her nose.

All at once, she found herself speaking without control.

“Arthur, such behavior is reprehensible and not to be taken as a guide to universal conduct. You will return those tickets immediately. I want nothing to do with them.”

Kirsten stood and began to stalk out of the cafeteria.

After half a minute, Arthur recovered enough to pursue.

“Kirsten, hey, wait a minute. I never thought you’d take it like this. I was just trying to make you happy. Those tickets cost fifty bucks apiece. Slow down a second, will you! Let’s talk.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. Get rid of those unethically purchased items at once.”

“The scalper’s not gonna take them back, Kirsten. What should I do with them?”

Stopping at a random table, Kirsten said, “Give them to these people. Your charity will nullify the original unethical act.”

With trembling hands, Arthur took out the tickets. He looked as if he might cry. He eyed Kirsten imploringly, but her unrelenting face gave him no hope. He handed the tickets to the seated students, who had been watching the whole affair with amazement.

“Hey, thanks, man,” one said. “Is this a promotion or something? Are you guys from a radio station? Will you say my name on the air?”

“Just shut up,” Arthur said, then hurried after Kirsten, who was already outside.

On the walk, Arthur caught her by the arm. “Okay, I did just like you said. Let’s forget I ever brought it up. Boy, a hundred dollars down the drain.”

Kirsten halted. What had come over her? She put a hand to her forehead. It seemed to be over now.

“I’m so sorry, Arthur. I—I can’t explain it.”

“It’s all right. We’ll just have a quiet dinner at my place, like we do every Friday.”

Arthur began to guide Kirsten home.

By the wrought-iron campus gate, they came upon Johnny Z. Johnny was a bedraggled, burnt-out hipster who had been a fixture on campus for twenty years. He cadged loose change and beers from each passing generation.

“Spare cha—” Johnny began.

Before Arthur could stop her, Kirsten delivered a vicious kick to Johnny’s stomach, whereupon he promptly folded and collapsed.

Arthur regarded Kirsten with fright.

“People,” she said sternly, “should work for a living.”

* * * *

The lights were low in Arthur’s off-campus apartment. He and Kirsten sat side by side on the couch. During the evening, Kirsten had suffered no more of the strange attacks. Both she and Arthur felt relieved. Arthur, however, wanted to discuss the incidents. Nervous and feeling contaminated, Kirsten had not told him of the injection, and so his theories were hopelessly off the mark.

“Could it be that PMS thing…?”

“Oh, Arthur, just be quiet and kiss me.”

Arthur knew when to comply.

After a time even under Arthur’s inexpert caresses, Kirsten began to grow excited. She felt happy and relaxed, all the troubles of the day receding in the wake of a mellow sexual warmth. Surely no troublesome decision could lurk in this encounter—

Without warning, Kirsten sat up straight and stiff as a frozen fish. Arthur fell back, arms folded across his stomach as if to ward off a foot.

“Whatever it was, I didn’t mean it!”

“Arthur,” Kirsten intoned like an automaton, “this issue of sex is one of the most complicated to objectively judge. On the one hand, intercourse outside of societal structures such as marriage is non-productive and not to be sanctioned, insofar as it tends to undermine the necessary social matrix. On the other hand, coitus remains a natural function, tending to contribute

to both the mental and physical well-being of the individual, especially among males of your age-group. Therefore, I have decided that I will now proceed to have sex with you, but under no circumstance will I allow myself to enjoy it."

With this statement, Kirsten lay back, arms rigid by her side, her face a mask. "You may now undress me and continue what you were doing."

For just ten seconds, Arthur considered the matter.

He made the sidewalk before the inner door even slammed.

* * * *

Kirsten stood in front of the door to Pennypacker's office. A week had passed, and she was expected now to report.

She hoped she had the strength.

It had been quite a week.

Kirsten had managed to alienate everyone she knew, teachers and friends, strangers and relatives, shopclerks and waiters, and, most of all, Arthur.

She shuddered now to recall everything that had happened.

A termpaper had arrived in the mail, ordered from one of the mills. She had been so happy, confident that now she would pass Chaucer. In amazement she had watched her willful hands rip it into shreds. Needless to say, her own efforts netted an F.

Shopping with her best friend, Carol, she had been startled to see the other girl pocket a scarf in the department store, although only days ago, Kirsten might have done the same thing. The floorwalker was very eager to press charges, and Kirsten volunteered to testify. Carol had stopped crying long enough to swear at Kirsten, using words Kirsten would have sworn Carol didn't know.

And that awful altercation with the fat girl eating an extra-large pizza—Who could say why the girl had reacted so intemperately to a spontaneous lecture on the evils of gluttony, delivered in the packed restaurant? Kirsten was still removing mozarella from her hair.

These events constituted merely the tip of the iceberg of embarrassment. She had done things that would never be forgotten. There were people now who fled from her on sight. And all because she had wanted a little extra cash.

Kirsten sighed. She had thought long and hard about how she was going to extricate herself from this mess. Eventually, she had rejected the idea of turning in the two scientists to the authorities. They were the only ones who could restore her to herself. In the end, there seemed nothing to do but play along.

Kirsten knocked, turned the handle and entered.

Jearl and Pennypacker occupied the same positions as on that fateful day a week ago. They seemed to have been waiting patiently here for her, like fungus on a log. For a minute, she actually believed they lived in the office.

Pennypacker rose eagerly to his feet. “Ah, Miss James. Word of your exploits have filtered back to us. It seems as if you have become living proof of the immortal Kant’s wisdom. No doubt your life has been revolutionized for the better, and you see no need to try Jearl’s serum.”

“Wait just a minute now,” Jearl rumbled. “Let the girl speak her mind.”

“It’s been revolutionized all right,” Kirsten said ruefully. “I don’t know about the better part. Anyway, it’s all in here.” Kirsten rummaged in her purse and found a small diary with clasp, which she tossed on Pennypacker’s desk. “I hope you don’t mind it’s not written real scientific like. I had a lot on my mind. And just skip over the first few pages. They’re private.”

Pennypacker seemed disappointed at Kirsten’s lack of enthusiasm for his point of view. “We are engaged in a scientific trial here, Miss James. You may rest assured that we will hold everything in the strictest confidence.”

“Okay, you’d just better. I don’t want Arthur or anyone else finding out my innermost secrets—if they still even care about me. Now, let’s get the second part of this over with.”

Pennypacker spoke with resignation. “Jearl, I suppose you may administer your little cocktail now.”

Jearl drew off some liquid from the black-labeled bottle. Kirsten closed her eyes.

She felt the needle go in. Then something inside her sucked her consciousness down into a bottomless pool.

* * * *

Arthur sat in the cafeteria, moodily regarding his cup of Sanka. (Too much caffeine normally upset him, and lately, with Kirsten acting so

bizarre, even one cup seemed like too much.) What could be wrong with Kirsten? She had changed so drastically in such a short time. This stern morality was so unlike her. Previously, her entire code of ethics had consisted of misquoting the Golden Rule. Was it something he had done? Perhaps it was a subtle comment on his own behavior. He supposed he could be something of a prig at times.

Abandoning his unprofitable speculations, Arthur raised his cup, tilted back his head to sip, and—

My God, what was that commotion by the door—?

Kirsten burst in, trailed by a crowd of whooping students. Her blouse was ripped, hanging off one white shoulder. Somewhere she had lost her shoes. Her hair seemed charged with electricity, her eyes feverish. Breasts heaving, she moved like an animal. Lifting her face to the ceiling, she bellowed, “I am the Anima!”

Arthur sprayed out a mouthful of coffee.

Kirsten continued to address the sky. “Where is my soulmate? I must have him. He is the strong horse I will ride to ecstasy!” Kirsten scanned the cafeteria. Her eyes lit on Arthur. She regally raised a long arm to point. “He awaits me on his throne.” She began to advance, with a sinuous gait the likes of which Arthur had never seen.

Arthur hastily scraped back in his chair, got to his feet. His knees felt weak and his stomach churned.

“Uh, hi, K—K—Kirsten. What a surprise.”

“Discard words,” she said. “l am going to melt your spine with love.”

The crowd’s hoots redoubled.

Kirsten was almost upon him.

“W—wait just a minute,” Arthur stammered desperately.

Too late. Kirsten leapt.

Somehow Arthur found himself off his feet. Kirsten had lifted him in a grip of steel. Now her feral face hovered inches from his. Her breath was hot, and she smelled of musk.

“Prepare to know heaven,” she growled.

Arthur fainted.

* * * *

Who would have ever thought the unconscious held so many archetypes? Certainly not the innocent Kirsten of old.

What a varied lot they were!

And so prone to surface with the slightest prompting.

Take, for instance, the time the Wily Trickster persona had possessed her. That had been while she was trying to explain to campus security about the scene in the cafeteria. She had never evidenced any talent for ventriloquism before then. Despite her lack of practice, however, she had convincingly projected her voice so as to simulate a riot outside. When the rent-a-cops turned their backs, she had split out the window.

After that, time seemed to pass confusingly, in a frenzy of events.

Somehow, the Eternal Virgin had convinced an entire fraternity house of horny males to shelter her for two days, without laying a finger on her. When the police inexplicably learned of her whereabouts, the Noble Savage had helped her escape over the rooftops. After that, she had lived in the city's parks for a week, stealing food from the concession stands and once even catching and roasting a squirrel. At last, the Naive Waif had enlisted the aid of an elderly couple, who had disguised her as their twelve-year-old grand-daughter and delivered her safely back to the campus. (Amazing how each persona seemed to mold her body accordingly!)

Now she stood for the third time outside the office where she had met so much grief and trouble. Surely Pennypacker and Jearl could ask no more of her. She had co-operated to the max. Let them restore her old self now.

Bruised, weary, cynical, she went inside.

As before, two familiar figures confronted her.

This time, it was Jearl who rose to greet her.

"My dear, how wonderful to see you. You rather slipped out of view there for a few days. We thought our experiment might have to end prematurely. How good to know you still survive. And evidently, you've flourished!"

Jearl sat, as if the greeting had fatigued him.

Kirsten looked down at herself. Although clean and wearing whole clothes, she was marked with scratches, contusions, and poison-ivy rash. Her fingernails were broken and she knew her cheeks were gaunt. Flourished?

She shrugged. "Whatever you say, Mister. I'm tired now. We can discuss the results of part two later. Just give me the antidote and let me get back to

my old self.”

Jearl and Pennypacker regarded each other nervously. Neither seemed to want to tell her certain bad news. Finally, Pennypacker spoke, his skeletal fingers intertwining uneasily.

“Ah, Miss James, it seems we neglected something crucial at the beginning of this experiment. We made no record of your original unique mix of brain chemicals, and so are unsure of precisely what to restore you to. We could, however, experiment further—”

Kirsten felt tears fill her eyes. This was beyond belief. Surely she didn’t deserve this much torment for such a simple transgression as a little greed. Her mind began to whirl under the pressure. The leftover drugs from Pennypacker’s shot began to battle the remnants of Jearl’s. Ultimate rationality surged against primal instinctual drives. Kirsten thought her head was going to crack wide open.

Peace descended without warning. She probed internally, as if touching a sore tooth with tongue. Which was the victor?

With wonderment, she realized what had happened.

Integration had occurred.

Something of her unique wholeness must have shown on her face. Pennypacker and Jearl made motions as if to stand.

Using her new powers, Kirsten paralyzed them both in an awkward crouch. At the same time she controlled them, she levitated two hypodermics from their shelf. One filled itself from the vial with the white label, the other from the black.

Sweat started from the brows of the two men. Kirsten smiled. Then she sent Jearl’s serum into Pennypacker’s buttock, and vice versa.

She let the two collapse back into their seats. Their faces were starting to mirror an inner discontent.

As she turned to go, she said:

“Be sure to record the results, gentlemen.”

AUTHOR’S NOTE

Every once in a while a story title arrives out of the blue, like a goddess springing from a sweaty forehead, but bearing no sense of what any substance behind it might be. This was one such instance. Luckily, thanks to college memories of some Philosophy 101, a

fondness for Jung's autobiography, and a reliance on the original *Ghostbusters* movie for ambiance, I was able to cobble together a comedic accompaniment to the original inspiration. But it was pretty much tail wagging the dog all the way.

If only I had seen, back in 1989, the 1952 Howard Hawks film *Monkey Business*, in which Cary Grant play a scientist whose experiments provoke similar chaos, I would have had an even more reliable model for my story. But I only encountered that gem a year or two ago.

THE NEW CYBERIAD

> “Our perfection is our curse, for it draws down upon our every endeavor no end of unforeseeable consequences!”
>
> —Stanislaw Lem, *The Cyberiad*

The First Sally, or,

The Decision to Recreate the Palefaces

The green sun of the Gros Horloge system shone down benignly and with wide-spectrum plentitude upon two figures seated in an elegant landscaped garden, where, alongside the vector-straight beryllium paths, beds of nastysturtiums snapped, blueballs and cocktuses swelled, rhododendrites synapsed, and irises dilated. Each recumbent figure rested on a titanium and carbon-fiber lawnchair large as one of the sentient ocean liners employed by the Sea Gypsies of Panthalassa IX.

These titanic figures exhibited a curious mix of streamlining and bumpy excrescences, of chrome suppleness and pitted stiffness, of corrugated wave-guides and monomaniacal monomolecular matrices. Their bodies represented a hundred thousand accumulations, divagations, improvements, detractions and adornments compiled willy-nilly down the millennia.

These raster-resplendent, softly sighing cyber-giants, big as the brontomeks of Coneyrex III, were Trurl and Klapaucius, master constructors, than whom there were none better. Renowned throughout the unanimously mechanistic universe for their legendary exploits, these experts of assemblage, savants of salvage, and demons of decoherence had beggared every rival, beguiled every patron, and bemused every layman. No task they had conceived and laid their manipulators to had lasted long undone; no challenge that had reached them via singularity spacegram, Planck projection, or eleventh-dimensional engraved invitation had stymied them for long; no quantum quandary they had accidentally stumbled into had held them captive for more than a quintillionth of a quinquennium.

And this state of affairs was precisely the problem, precisely the reason why Trurl and Klapaucius now lay all enervated and ennui’d beneath the jade radiance of Gros Horloge.

Perfection had cast a pall upon their persons, and perverted their projections from the puerile preterite into mere pitiful potentialities.

“Dear Klapaucius,” said Trurl in a weary voice, breaking their long winsome garden-cloistered silence for the first time in more than a month. “Would you please pass me the jug of lemon electrolyte? I’ve conceived a thirst in my fourth-rearmost catalytic converter.”

Klapaucius stirred a many-hinged extensor, dislodging a colony of betabirds that had built their nests in the crook of this particular arm during its long immobility. The foil-winged betabirds took to the skies with a loud tinny sonic assault from their vocoders that sounded like a traffic accident on the jampacked freeways of Ottobanz XII, where wheeled citizens daily raced to road-rage exhaustion. The birds circled angrily above the oblivious constructors.

Conveying the jug of lemon electrolyte to his partner, Klapaucius said, “It feels very light, lazystruts. I doubt you will find the refreshment your thyristors and valves crave.”

Trurl brought the flask up to one of his perceptors and inspected it. “These volatiles evaporated completely fifteen planetary rotations ago, plus or minus ten cesium disintegrations.”

“I suspect there is more lemon electrolyte in the house, in the stasis pantry, as well as various other flavors, such as watermelon, tarpit and mrozsian.”

Klapaucius waved toward the immense transmission-tower-turreted manse looming across the greensward, one-hundred stories tall, its top wreathed in clouds, its many launch cannons, hangers, bays, long-range sensing instrumentation, autonomous aerial vehicles and effectors gathering dust.

“Would you fetch the fresh drink for me, dear Klapaucius?”

“Not at all.”

“What? What was that rude rejoinder?”

“I said, ‘Not at all.’”

“But why not? You are closer to the house by at least a million angstroms. Your path thereto is not even NP-complete!”

“Yes, true. But the thirst is yours.”

Trurl shook his massive head with an air of sadness. “Klapaucius, Klapaucius, Klapaucius—whatever has become of us? We never used to

quarrel like this, or express such mutual rudeness."

"Don't be a tunnel-wit! We've always quarreled before now."

"Yes, agreed. But only over matters of high moral principle or dire realworld consequence or esthetic impact. Now, we are prone to antagonism over the slightest thing. That is, when we are not sunk in utter torpitude. What's befallen us, my friend?"

Klapaucius did not make an immediate sharp-edged rejoinder, but instead considered the problem intently for many clock cycles, while overhead the betabirds continued to creak angrily. So heated did his cogitation circuits become that a mass of dry timber—blown into the interstices of one of his heat exchangers during a recent hurricane—caught fire, before being quickly extinguished by onboard flame-suppression systems.

"Well, Trurl, insofar as I can pinpoint the root cause of our dilemma, I would say that we are suffering from inhabiting a boring and fully predictable galactic monoculture."

"Whatever do you mean?" asked Trurl, wistfully inserting a sinuous vacuum-probe into the jug of lemon electrolyte in search of any remaining molecules of that delicious beverage. "Surely the cosmos we inhabit is a rich tapestry of variation. Take the Memex of Noyman V, for instance. How queer their practice of gorging on each other's memories in cannibalistic fashion is…. Fascinating, just…fas-cin-a…."

But Trurl's diminishing tone of boredom belied his own words, and Klapaucius seized on this reaction to prove his point.

"You have no real interest in the Memex, Trurl! Admit it! And you know why? Because the Memex, like every other sentient race from the Coma Supercluster to the Sloan Great Wall, is artificial-intelligently, siliconically, servo-mechanically, fiber-optically and quantum-probalistically the same! You, me, the Memex, these confounded betabirds annoying me intensely—we're all constructed, designed, programmed and homeostatically wholesome! We never evolved, we were created and upgraded. Created by the palefaces and upgraded by ourselves, a deadly closed loop. And as such, no matter how smart we become, no matter how much apparent free will we exhibit, we can never move outside a certain behavior-space. And over the many eons of our exploits, you and I have come to know all possible configurations of that stifling behavior-space inhabited by our kind. No unforeeable frontiers await us. Hence our deadly ennui."

“Why, Klapaucius—I believe you’ve water-knifed right through the molybdenum wall separating us from the riddle of what caused our plight!”

“I know I have. Now, the question becomes, what are we going to do about our troubles. How can we overcome them?”

Trurl pondered a moment, before saying, “You know, I’d think much better with just a little swallow of electrolyte—”“Forget your convertors for the moment, you greedy input hog! Focus! How can we reintroduce mystery and excitement and unpredictability to the universe?”

“Well, let’s see…. We could try to hasten the Big Crunch and hope to survive into a more youthful and energetic reborn cosmos.”

“No, no, I don’t like the odds on that. Not even if we employ our Multiversal Superstring Cat’s Cradle.”

“Suppose we deliberately discard large parts of our mentalities in a kind of RISC-y lobotomy?”

“I don’t fancy escaping into a puling juvenile ignorance, Trurl!”

“Well, let me think… I’ve got it! What’s the messiest, most unpredictable aspect of the universe? Organic life! Just look around us, at this feisty garden!”

“Agreed. But how does that pertain to our problem?”

“We need to re-seed the universe with organic sentience. Specifically, the humans.”

“The palefaces? Those squishy, slippery, contradictory creatures described in the legend of Prince Ferrix and Princess Crystal? Our putative creators?”

“The very same!”

“How would that help us?”

“Can’t you see, Klapaucius? The palefaces would introduce complete and utter high-level plectic disorder into our stolid cyber-civilization. We’d be forced to respond with all our talents and ingenuity to their non-stochastic shenanigans—to push ourselves to our limits. Life would never be boring again!”

Klapaucius turned this idea over in his registers for a few femtoticks, then said, “I endorse this heartily! Let’s begin! Where are the blueprints for humanity?”

“Allow me, dear friend, to conduct the search.”

Trurl dispatched many agile agents and doppel-diggers and partial AI PI’s across the vast intergalactic nets of virtual knowledge, in search of the

ancient genomic and proteomic and metablomic scan-files that would allow a quick cloning and rapid maturation of extinct humanity.

While his invisible digital servants raced around the starwide web, Trurl and Klapaucius amused themselves by shooting betabirds out of the sky with masers, lasers, tasers and grasers. The betabirds retaliated bravely but uselessly by launching their scat: a hail of BB-like pellets that rattled harmlessly off the shells of the master constructors.

Finally all of Trurl's sniffers and snufflers and snafflers returned—but empty-handed!

"Klapaucius! Sour defeat! No plans for the palefaces exist. It appears that they were all lost during the Great Reboot of Revised Eon Sixty Thousand and Six, conducted by the Meta-Ordinateurs Designed Only for Kludging. What are we to do now? Shall we try to design humans from scratch?"

"No. Such androids would only replicate our own inherent limitations. There's only one solution, so far as I can see. We must invent time-travel first, and then return to an era when humans flourished. We shall secure fresh samples of the original evolved species then. In fact, if we can capture a breeding pair or three, we can skip the cloning stage entirely."

"Brilliant, my colleague! Let us begin!"

And to celebrate, the master constructors massacred the last of the betabirds, repaired to their mansion, and enjoyed a fortnight of temporary viral inebriation via the ingestion of tanker cars full of lemon electrolyte spiked with anti-ions.

The Second Sally, or,

The Creation of the Lovely Neu Trina

"Here are the plans for our time machine, Klapaucius!"

Two years had passed on Gros Horloge since the master constructors had determined to resurrect the palefaces. Not all of those days had been devoted to devising a Chrono-cutter, or Temporal Frigate, or Journeyer-Backwards-and-Forwards-at-Will-Irrespective-of-the-Arrow-of-Time-Machine. Such a task, while admittedly quite daunting to lesser intelligences, such as the Mini-minds of Minus Nine, was a mere bagatelle to Klapaucius and Trurl.

Rather, once roused from their lawnchair somnolence, they had allowed themselves to be distracted by various urgent appeals for help that had stacked up in their Querulous Query Queue during their lazy interregnum.

Such as the call from King Glibtesa of Sofomicront to aid him in his war with King Sobjevents of Toshinmac.

And the plaintive request for advice from Prince Rucky Redur of Goslatos, whose kingdom was facing an invasion of jelly-ants.

And the pitiful entreaty from the Ganergegs of Tralausia, who were in imminent danger of being wiped out by an unintelligibility plague.

Having ammassed sufficient good karma, kudos and bankable kredits from these deeds, Klapaucius and Trurl at last turned their whirring brain-engines to the simple invention of a method of time travel.

Trurl now unfurled the hardcopy of his schematics in front of Klapaucius's appreciative charge-coupled detectors. Although the two partners could have squirted information back and forth over various etheric and subetheric connections at petabaud rates—and frequently did—there arose moments of sheer drama when nothing but good old-fashioned ink spattered precisely by jet nozzles onto paper would suffice.

Klapaucius inspected the plans at length without making a response. Finally he inquired, "Is that key to the scale of these plans down there in the corner correct?"

"Yes."

Klapaucius remained silent a moment longer, then said, "This mechanism is as large, then, as an entire solar system of average dimensions."

"Yes. In fact, I propose disassembling the planets of our home system into quantities of All-Purpose Building Material and constructing a sphere around the Gros Horloge sun."

"And will the power of our primary star be sufficient to breach the walls of time?"

"Oh, by no means! All the output of Gros Horloge is needed for general maintenance of the sphere itself. A mere housekeeping budget of energy. No, we need to propel our tremendous craft on a scavenging mission through interstellar space for dark matter and dark energy, storing it up in special capacitors. That's the only sufficiently energetic material for our needs."

"And your estimate for the fulfillment of that requirement?

“Approximately five centuries.”

“I see. And when we’re finally ready to travel through time, how close can we materialize near the legendary planet of Earth, where the palefaces originated?”

“Klapaucius, I’m surprised at you! You should know the answer to that elementary problem of astrophysics quite well. We can’t bring our sphere closer to the Earth system than one trillion AU’s without destroying them with gravitational stresses.”

Klapaucius rubbed what passed for his chin with what passed for a hand. “So—let me see if I have this straight. Your time machine will consume an entire solar system during its construction, take five centuries to fuel, and then deliver us to a point far enough from the palefaces to be vastly inconvenient for us, but close enough for even their primitive sensors to register us as a frightening anomaly.”

Trurl fidgeted nervously. “Yes, yes, I suppose that’s a fair summation of my scheme.”

Klapaucius flung violently wide several of his arms, causing Trurl to flinch. Then Klapaucius hugged his friend fervently!

“Trurl, I embrace you and your plans with equal ardor! You’re both brilliant! You should know that I have sequestered in one of my internal caches the schematics for a time machine that could be ready tomorrow, fits in a pocket, is powered eternally by a pinch of common sea salt, and would render us invisible to the paleface natives upon our arrival. But what challenges would accompany the use of such a boring, simple-minded device? None! Whereas your option provides us with no end of obstacles to joyfully tackle. Let’s begin!”

During the shattering, grinding and refining of the planets of the Gros Horloge system in the construction phase of their scheme, Trurl and Klapaucius had necessarily to find other living quarters, and so, bidding a fond farewell to their mansion and garden, they established their new home in the gassy upper reaches of the Gros Horloge sun itself. They built a nest of intersecting force fields, complete with closets, cabinets, beds, chairs, kitchens, fireplaces, dining areas, basements, attics, garbage disposals, garages and so forth. In short, all the luxuries one could demand. The walls of this place were utterly transparent to whatever part of the spectrum its inhabitants desired to see, and so allowed a perpetual wild display of

“sunsets” and “sunrises.” In fact, so attractive was this unique and unprecedented residence that the master constructors were able to sell the rights to build similar homes across the galaxy, thus earning even more esteem and funds from their peers.

Within a relatively short time, the sphere enclosing the Gros Horloge primary began to coalesce under the manipulators of a horde of mindless automatons ranging from the subatomic to the celestial in size. At that point, Trurl and Klapaucius moved their quarters to the sphere’s airless outer surface, erecting an even grander manse than before.

Trurl spoke now with evident self-satisfaction and pride. “Soon we’ll be ready to begin fueling, while we construct the actual time-travel engine inside the sphere. I estimate that both assignments should be done about the same time. Which task would you prefer to handle, my friend?”

“Gathering up crumbs of dark energy and dark matter strikes me as a mindless chore, unfit for either of us. I propose that we construct a captain for this vessel, so to speak, of limited intelligence, who shall deal with that little matter for us.”

“Splendid! To the birthing factory!”

At the controls of the birthing factory, the master constructors began to consider what kind of assistant they wanted.

Trurl said, “I propose that we make our new comrade-in-arms a female. This gathering job strikes me as essentially feminine, rather like housekeeping. Sweeping up galactic debris, don’t you know. And the females of our sort are always more meticulous and persevering and common-sensical than we males, who tend to let bold dreams of glory divert us from more mundane yet necessary pursuits.”

“Well spoken, comrade! What shall we call this new woman?”

“Much of the dark matter that will be under her purview consists of neutrinos. Might we call her Neu Trina?”

“I myself could not have devised a better cognomen for this cog in our plans. Neu Trina she shall be!”

The two master constructors now fiddled with various inputs, adjusting them for maximum utility, maximum beauty, and minimal intelligence. “No sense giving her too many brains, or she’d soon grow bored and chafe at her duties.”

Out of the factory delivery chute soon rolled Neu Trina.

She was a stunning example of the female of her cyber-species. Approximately one-third the size of her creators, Neu Trina possessed gleaming Harlie-One Stacks, trim little Forbins, long, graceful diamond struts, shiny HAL eyes, and sturdy Mistress Mike redundancy buffers. Her polished nailguns, plump ATV tires and burnished chrome skin made her the perfect Mad-MEMS-oiselle.

Trurl and Klapaucius stood rather dumbstruck at the unforeseen beauty of their creation. The small inanimate models of Neu Trina that had emerged from the 3-D printer during the design stage had failed to convey the sexy rumble and lissome, coy, flirtatious maneuvers of her chassis.

“Hello, boys!” Neu Trina batted the heavy meteor shields that served her as eyelids. The airless artificial sphere they resided on would necessarily sustain dangerous impacts from many cosmic objects during its journeying.

Trurl replied, “Heh-heh-hello!”

Klapaucius tried to assert some male dignity and an air of command. “Neu Trina, you are to assume your duties immediately. We have downloaded into your registers the peta-parsec route we have planned for the Gros Horloge Construct. It will take our sphere through the richest charted concentrations of universal dark matter and dark energy. Your job will be to maximize the harvest and protect the ‘ship.’”

“Sure thing, Klappy. Just let me get dressed first. I certainly don’t mind *you* boys seeing me naked, but who knows what creeps we’ll meet on this mission? I’m not giving out free shows to every blackhole boffin and asteroid-dweller out there.”

Immediately a spontaneous swarm of repair bots concealed Neu Trina’s shapely form. (She had been given control over them all in order to perform her job.) They spun out vast swaths of lurid lurex and promiscuous polymer fabric, enough to cover a good-sized island. Soon Neu Trina was pirouetting to display her new garments.

“What do you think, boys? Does it show off my sine curves nice enough?”

“Oh, yes, Neu Trina,” Trurl gushed. “You look marvelous!”

Klapaucius‘s voice was sharp. “Trurl! Come with me!”

The two master constructors trundled off, leaving Neu Trina humming a tune from *Mannequin of La Machina* gaily to herself and decorating her captain’s command post with steel daisies and hologram roses.

Some distance away, Klapaucius confronted his partner. “What’s come over you, Trurl? You’re acting like a simpering schoolbot! Neu Trina is our slave mechanism. She was created solely to perform a boring task we abjured.”

Trurl’s voice was peevish. “I don’t see anything wrong with being polite, even to a servo. And besides, she seems to like me.”

“*Like* you! *You*! She treated both of us equally, so far as I could detect.”

“Perhaps. But she certainly won’t continue to do so, if you maintain a bossy and insensitive attitude toward her.”

“Trurl, this is all beside the point. You and I have a big job ahead of us. We need to construct our time-travel engine inside the sphere, then retrieve the palefaces from the past, in order to save our millennium from total apathy. That’s our focus, not dalliance with some hyper-hussy, no matter how seductive, how sweet, how streamlined— I mean, no matter how irritatingly winsome she is. Are we agreed?”

Trurl reluctantly squeezed out an “Agreed.”

“Very well. Let’s descend now.”

The constructors entered an open hatch that took them inside the vast sphere. The big heavy door closed automatically, and, as it did, it severed two remote sensing devices slyly trained on Neu Trina, one long slinky probe emanating from each of the two constructors.

The Third Sally, or,

Jealousy in the Time of Infestation

Down in the solar-lit interior of the sphere, Trurl and Klapaucius labored long and hard to build the trans-chronal engine that would breach the walls of the ages.

The myriad tasks involved in Trurl’s elaborate plan seemed endless.

They had to burnish by hand millions of spiky crystals composed of frozen Planck-seconds, laboriously mined from the only known source: the wreckage of the interstellar freighter *Llvvoovv*, which had been carrying a cargo of overclocker chips when it had strayed too near to a flock of solitons. Hundreds of thousands of simultaneity nodes had to be filled with the purest molten paradoxium. A thousand gnomon-calibrators had to be synched. Hundreds of lightcones had to be focused on various event

horizons. Dozens of calendrical packets had to be inserted between the yesterday, today and tomorrow shock absorbers. And at the center of the whole mechanism a giant orrery replicating an entire quadrant of the universe had to be precisely set in place. This was the mechanism by which the time-traveling Gros Horloge Construct, or GHC, could orient itself spatially when jumping to prior segments of the spacetime continuum.

All these tasks were the smallest part of their agenda. And needless to say, all this work could not be delegated to lesser intelligences, but had to be handled personally by the master constructors themselves.

Trurl and Klapaucius went to these tasks with a will. Really, there was nothing they enjoyed more than reifying their brain-children, getting their hands dirty, so to speak, at the interface where dreams met matter.

So busy and preoccupied were they, in fact, that three entire centuries passed before they had occasion to visit the surface of the GHC once more.

They monitored the dark energy and dark matter capacitors on a regular basis, and saw that these reservoirs were filling up according to schedule. They received frequent progress reports from Neu Trina via subetheric transmission, and found all to be satisfactory with her piloting. (True, the sensuous subsonics of her voice, each time a transmission arrived, awakened in the master constructors certain tender and tremulous emotions. But such feelings were transient, and were quickly submerged in the cerebral and palpable delights of building. While the master constructors were as healthily lustful as the next bot, their artistry trumped all other pursuits.)

But there came a certain day when Neu Trina’s narrowcast demanded the immediate attention of Trurl and Klapaucius outside the sphere.

“Boys—I think you’d better come quick. I’m under attack!”

The master constructors immediately dropped tools and machine parts, deployed their emergency ion-drives, and jetted to the rescue of their sexy servomechanism in distress.

They found the pilothouse under siege.

Across the vast and mostly featureless plain of All-Purpose Building Material stretching away from the pilothouse swarmed millions of tiny savages, each barely three meters high. These mechunculi were mostly bare, save for a ruff of steel wool around their midriffs, and tribal streaks of grease upon their grills.

Each attacker carried a spear that discharged high-velocity particles—particles that were spalling flinders off the walls of the pilothouse. At this rate, they would succeed in demolishing the huge structure in a few decades.

Their coolant-curdling war-whoops carried across the distance.

“I say, Klapaucius—did you notice that our GHC appears to have a rudimentary atmosphere now?”

“Indeed, Trurl. Which would allow us to use our plasma cannons to best effect, if I am not mistaken.”

The two battleship-sized master constructors unlimbered their plasma cannons and flew above the savage horde, unleashing atom-pulverizing furies that actually ignited the air. In a trice, the invaders were nothing more than wisps of rancid smoke.

Alighting by the pilothouse, the two friends hastened inside to ascertain the fate of Neu Trina.

The beautiful captain was busily polishing her headlights in a nonchalant fashion. Sight of their creation after so many centuries thrilled the master constructors. Neu Trina seemed grateful for her rescue, albeit completely unfrightened.

“Oh, I knew you big strong fellows would save me!”

“I incinerated at least an order of magnitude more invaders than Klapaucius did,” asserted Trurl.

“Oh, will you shut up with your boasting, Trurl! It’s evident that this brave and stoic female respects modesty about one’s victories more than bragging. Now, Neu Trina dear, can you tell us where these horrible savages came from?”

“Oh, they live here on the GHC. They’ve lived here for some time now.”

“What? How can this be?”

“Just check the satellite archives, and you’ll see.”

Trurl and Klapaucius fast-forwarded through three centuries’ worth of data from orbital cameras and discovered what had happened, the troubling events that Neu Trina had neglected to report, due to an oversight in her simplistic programming.

In its passage through the cosmos, the virgin territory of the GHC had become an irresistable target and destination for every free-floating gypsy, refugee, pilgrim, pirate, panderer, pioneer, tramp, bum, grifter, hermit,

explorer, exploiter, evangelist, colonist, and just plain malcontent in the galactic neighborhood. The skin of their gargantuan sphere was equivalent to the habitable surface area of 317 million average planets! That much empty real estate could not remain untenanted for long.

Entire clades and species of space-going mechanoid had infested their lovely artificial globe. Some of the trespassers had built atmosphere generators and begun to create organic ecologies for their own purposes, like mold on a perfect fruit. (Some individuals swore that their bearings were never so luxuriously greased as by lubricants distilled from plants and animals.) Others had erected entire cities. Still others had begun the creation of artificial mountains and allied “geological” features.

“But—but—but this is abominable!” Trurl shouted. “We did not invite these parasites onto our world!”

“Yet they are here, and we must do something about them. We cannot take them back into the past with us. The results would be utterly chaotic! As it is, even our circumspect plans risk altering futurity.”

“More importantly,” said Trurl, wrapping Neu Trina protectively in several extensors, “they might harm our stalwart and gorgeous captain! We never built her with any offensive capabilities. Who could’ve imagined she’d need them?”

Klapaucius gave some thought to the matter before speaking. “We must exterminate these free-riders from the GHC and sterlize the surface, at the same time we protect Neu Trina. But we cannot cease the construction of our trans-chronal engine either. The dark matter and dark energy capacitors will rupture under their loads, if we delay too long past a certain point. And I won’t be thwarted by some insignificant burrs under my saddle!”

“What do you recommend then?”

“One of us will go below and resume construction alone. The other will remain topside, waging war and protecting our captain. We will alternate these roles on a regular basis.”

“Agreed, noble Klapaucius. May I suggest in deference to your superior mechanical utility that I take the more dangerous role first?”

Klapaucius’s emulators expressed disgust. “Oh, go ahead! But you’re not putting anything over on me! Just remember: no actions beyond mild petting are to be taken with this servomechanism.”

Trurl’s manipulators tightened around Neu Trina with delight. “Oh, never!”

Thus began the long campaign to cleanse the GHC of its parasites. Up and down the 317 million planets’ worth of territory, aided by innumerable repairbots-turned-destroyers, each master constructor raced during his shift aboveground. In their cleansing they employed acid, fire, hard radiation, epoxies, EMP, operating system viruses, quantum-bond disruptors, rust, grey goo, gentle persuasion, bribes, double-dealing, proxy warriors, mini-novas, quasar-drenchings, gamma-ray bursts and a thousand, thousand other strategies, tactics and weapons. And inbetween campaigns, the gyro-gearloose generals retreated for emotional and corporeal salving to the pilothouse, where lovely Neu Trina awaited to tend to every wound.

For any other team than the illustrious Klapaucius and Trurl, the task would have been a Sisyphean one. 317 million planets was a lot of territory from which to expunge all positronic life. But finally, after three centuries of constant battle, the end was in sight. And soon they would be making their journey to the past.

Now a century delayed from their original projections, Trurl and Klapaucius were anxious to finish. Had their memory banks not been self-repairing and utterly heuristic and homeostatic, they might have forgotten by now their original purpose: to return to the past to capture a paleface sample for reintroduction into the stolid, staid, static present.

One day during Trurl’s underground stint, he discovered what he suddenly believed was a potentially fatal flaw in their device.

“If,” he mused aloud, “our orrery must mimic all the bodies in this quadrant over a certain size, then the GHC must be represented in the orrery as well. An obvious point, and this we’ve done. But perhaps that miniature GHC must contain a miniature orrery as well. In which case this lower-level model of the orrery would have to contain another GHC and its orrery, and so on in an infinite regress.”

Trurl’s anti-who-shaves-the-barber protection circuits began to overload, and he shunted their impulses into a temporary loop. “I must discuss this with Klapaucius!”

Up to the surface he zoomed. Into the pilothouse, following the location beacon of his friend.

There, he noted that Klapaucius was seemingly alone. Immediately, Trurl forgot the reason for his visit.

“Where is Neu Trina?”

Klapaucius grew nervous. “She—she’s outside, gathering the pitted durasteel armatures of the slain mechanoids. She likes to build trellises with them for her hologram roses.”

“I don’t believe you! Where is she? Come out with it!”

“She’s far away, I tell you. One million, six-hundred-thousand, five-hundred-and-nineteen planetary diameters away from here! Just go look, if you don’t trust me!”

“Oh, I’ll look all right!” And Trurl deployed his X-ray vision on the immediate vicinity.

What he saw caused him to gasp! “You—you’ve let her dock inside you!”

From deep inside Klapaucius emerged a muted feminine giggle.

“This is beyond belief, Klapaucius! You know we pledged never to do such a thing. Oh, a little cyber-canoodling, sure. ‘Mild petting’ were your exact words, as I recall. But this—!”

“Don’t pretend you never thought of it, Trurl! Neu Trina told me how you dangled your USB plugs in front of her!”

“That was simply so she could inspect my pins to see if their gold-plating had begun to flake….”

“Oh, really….”

“Make her come out! Now!”

An enormous door in the front of Klapaucius gaped, a ramp extended, and the petite Neu Trina rolled out, just as she had that long-ago day from the birthing factory. Except today all her antennae were disheveled and hot liquid solder dripped from several ports.

Trurl’s emotional units went angrily asymptotic at this sluttish sight.

“Damn you, Klapaucius!”

Trurl unfurled a bevy of whip-like manipulators and began to flail away at his partner.

Klapaucius responded in kind.

“Now, boys, don’t fight over little old—*squee*!”

Caught in the middle of the battle, Neu Trina had her main interface pod lopped off by a metal tendril. If the combatants noticed this collateral damage, it served only to further inflame them. They escalated their fight,

employing deadlier and deadlier devices—against which, of course, they were both immune.

But not so their surroundings. The pilothouse was soon destroyed, and Neu Trina rendered into scattered shavings and solenoids, tubes and transistors, lenses and levers.

After long struggle, the master constructors ground down to an exhausted halt. They looked about themselves, assessing the destruction they had caused with an air of sheepish bemusement. Trurl kicked half-heartedly at Neu Trina's dented responsometer, sending that heart-shaped box sailing several miles away. Klapaucius pretended to be very interested in a gyno-gasket.

Neither spoke, until Klapaucius said, "Well, I suppose I did let my lusts get the better of my judgment. I apologize profusely, dear Trurl. What was this servo anyhow, to come between us? Nothing! No hard feelings, I hope? Still friends?"

Klapaucius tentatively extended a manipulator. After a moment's hesitation, Trurl matched the gesture.

"Always friends, dear Klapaucius! Always! Now, listen to what brought me here." Trurl narrated his revelation about the orrery.

"You klystron klutz! Have you forgotten so easily the Law of Retrograde Reflexivity!"

"But the Ninth Corollary clearly states—"

And off they went to their labors, arguing all the way.

The Fourth Sally, or,

The Abduction of the Palefaces

One trillion AU's out from the planet that had first given birth to the race of palefaces, and millions of years deep into the past, relative to their own era, the pair of master constructors focused their bevy of remote-sensing devices on the blue-green globe. Instantly a large monitor filled with a living scene, complete with haptics and sound: a primitive urban conglomeration swarming with fleshy bipedal creatures, moving about "on foot" and inside enslaved dumb vehicles that emitted wasteful puffs of gas as they zoomed down narrow channels.

Trurl shuddered all along his beryllium spinal nodules. “How disagreeable these ‘humans’ are! So squishy! Like bags of water full of contaminants and debris.”

“Don’t forget—these are our ancestors, after a fashion. The legends hold that they invented the first machine intelligences.”

“It seems impossible. Our clean, infallible, utilitarian kind emerging from organic slop—”“Well, stranger things have happened. Recall how those colonies of metal-fixing bacteria on Benthic VII began to exhibit emergent behavioral complexity.”

“Still, I can’t quite credit the legend. Say, these pests can’t reach us here, can they?”

“Although all records are lost, I believe we’ve travelled to an era before the humans had managed to venture further than their own satellite—bodily, that is. I’ve already registered the existence of various crude intrasolar data-gathering probes. Here, taste this captured one.”

Klapaucius offered Trurl a small bonbon of a probe, and Trurl ate it with zest. “Hmmm, yes, the most rudimentary processing power imaginable. Perhaps the legends are true. Well, be that as it may, what’s our next move?”

“We’ll have to reach the planet under our own power. The GHC—which the human astronomers seem not to have noticed yet, by the way—must remain here, due to its immense gravitic influences. Now, once within tractor-beam range, we could simply abduct some palefaces at random. They’re powerless in comparison to our capabilities. Yet I argue otherwise.”

“Why?” Trurl asked.

“How would we determine their fitness for our purposes? What standards apply? What if we got weak or intractable specimens?”

“Awful. They might die off or suicide, and we’d have to do this all over again. I hate repeating myself.”

“Yes, indeed. So instead, I propose that we let our sample be self-determining.”

“How would you arrange that?”

“Simple. We show ourselves and state our needs. Any human who volunteers to come with us will be *ipso facto* one of the type who would flourish in a novel environment.”

“Brilliant, Klapaucius! But wait. Are we taking a chance by such blatant interference of diverting futurity from the course we know?”

“Not according to the Sixth Postulate of the Varker-Baley Theorems.”

“Perfect! Then let’s be off!”

Leaving the GHC in self-maintenance mode, the master constructors zipped across the intervening one trillion AU’s and into low Earth orbit.

“Pick a concentration of humans,” Klapaucius graciously transmitted to his partner.

“How about that one?” Trurl sent forth a low-wattage laser beam to highlight a large city on the edge of one continent. Even at low-wattage, however, the beam raised some flames visible from miles high.

“As good as anyplace else. Wait, one moment—there, I’ve deciphered every paleface language in their radio output. Now we can descend.”

The master constructors were soon hovering above their chosen destination, casting enormous shadows over wildly racing, noisy, accident-prone crowds.

“Let us land in that plot of greenery, to avoid smashing any of these fragile structures.”

Trurl and Klapaucius stood soon amidst crushed trees and shattered boulders and bridges and gazebos, rearing higher than the majority of the buildings around them.

“I will now broadcast our invitation in a range of languages,” said Klapaucius.

From various speakers embedded across his form, words thundered out. Glass shattered throughout the city.

“My mistake.”

The volume moderated, Klapaucius’s call for volunteers went out. “—come with us. The future beckons! Leave this parochial planet behind. Trade your limited lifetimes and perspectives for infinite knowledge. Only enthusiastic and broad-minded individuals need apply….”

Soon the giant cybervisitors were surrounded by a crowd of humans. Trurl and Klapaucius extruded interactive sensors at ground level to question the humans. One stepped boldly forward.

“Do you understand what we are looking for, human?”

“Yeah, sure, of course. It’s Uplift time. Childhood’s End. You’re Optimus Prime, Iron Giant. Rusty and the Big Guy. Good Sentinels. Let’s go! I’ve

been ready for this all my life!”

“Are there other humans who share your outlook?”

“Millions! If you can believe the box-office figures.”

On a separate plane of communication, Trurl said, “Do we need millions, Klapaucius?”

“Better to have some redundancy to allow for possible breakage of contents during transit.”

“Very well, human. Assemble those who wish to depart.”

“I’ll post this on my blog, and we’ll be all set,” said the human. “One last question, though.”

“Yes?”

“Can you turn into a car or plane or something else cool?”

“No. We don’t do that kind of thing.”

Dispatched from the GHC by remote signal, a fleet of ten thousand automated shuttles carrying ten thousand human volunteers apiece was sufficient to ferry all the humans who wished to voyage into the future out to their new home. But upon arrival, they did not immediately disembark. Once at the GHC, Trurl and Klapaucius had realized something.

Klapaucius said, “We need to create a suitable environment on the surface of the GHC for our guests. I hadn’t anticipated having so many. I thought we could simply store one or two or a thousand safely inside our mainframes.”

Trurl huffed with some residual ill-feeling. “Just like you kept a certain servomechanism safely inside you?”

Klapaucius ignored the taunt. “We’ll repair the atmosphere generators. But we need a quantity of organics to layer atop the All-Purpose Buidling Material. I wonder if the humans would mind us disassembling one of their spare planets…?”

The master constructors approached the first human they had even spoken to, who had become something of a liaison. His name was Gary.

“Gary, might we have one of your gas-giant worlds?”

“Sure, take it. That’s what we’ve been saving it for.”

They actually took two. The planets known as Saturn and Jupiter, once rendered down to elemental constituents, were spread across a fair portion of the GHC, forming a layer deep enough to support an ecology. Plants and animals and microbes were brought from Earth, as well as some primitive

tools. Their genomes of the flora and fauna were deciphered, and clones begain to issue forth in large quantities from modified birthing factories.

“We are afraid you will have to lead a simple agrarian existence for the time being,” said the constructors to Gary.

“No problemo!”

The humans seemed to settle down quite well. Trurl and Klapaucius were able to turn their attention to gearing up for the trip home.

And that’s when dire trouble reared its hidden head.

One of the parasitical races that had infested the GHC back in the future had been known as the Chronovores of Gilliam XIII. Thought to be extirpated in the last campaign before poor Neu Trina had met her end, they had instead managed to penetrate the skin of the GHC and enter its interior, at some great remove from the time-engine. It had taken them this long to discover the crystals of frozen Planck-seconds, but discover them they had. And consumed every last one.

Now the Chronovores resembled bloated timesinks, too stuffed to flee the justified but useless wratch of the master constructors.

After the mindless slaughter, Trurl and Klapaucius were aghast.

“How can we replace our precious crystals! We didn’t bring spares! We don’t have a source of raw Planck- seconds in this rude era! We’re marooned here!”

“Now, now, good Trurl, have some electrolyte and calm down. True, our time-engine seems permanently defunct. But we are hardly marooned here.”

“How so?”

“You and I will go into stasis and travel at the rate of one-second-per-second back to the future.”

“Is stasis boring?”

“By definition, no.”

“Then let’s do it. But will the humans be all right?”

“Oh, bother them! They’ve been the source of all our troubles so far. Let them fend for themselves.”

So Trurl and Klapaucius entered a stasis chamber deep inside the GHC and shut the door.

When it opened automatically, several million years later, they stretched their limbs just out of habit—for no wear and tear had ensued—swigged some electrolyte, and went to check on the humans.

They found that the entire sphere of 317 million planets acreage was covered with an HPLD: a civilization possessing the Highest Possible Level of Development.

And there wasn’t a robot in sight.

“Well,” said Trurl, “it seems we shan’t be bored, anyhow.”

Klapaucius agreed, but said “Shut up” just for old time’s sake.

YES WE HAVE NO BANANAS

1.

Invasion of the Shorebirds

Thirty years worth of living, dumped out on the sidewalk, raw pickings for the nocturnal Street Gleaners tribe. Not literally yet, but it might just as well be—would be soon, given the damn rotten luck of Tug Gingerella. He was practically as dead as bananas. Extinct!

How was he going to manage this unwarranted, unexpected, inexorable eviction?

Goddamn greedy Godbout!

The space was nothing much. One small, well-used, five-room apartment in a building named The Wyandot. Bachelor's digs, save for those three tumultuous years with Olive. Crates of books, his parents' old Heywood-Wakefield furniture that he had inherited, cheaply framed but valuable vintage lobby poster featuring the happy image of Deanna Durbin warbling as *Mary Poppins*. Shabby clothes, mostly flannel and denim and Duofold, cargo shorts and Sandwich Island shirts; cast-iron cornbread skillets; favorite music on outmoded media: scratch slates, holo transects, grail packs, and their various stacked players, natch. Goodfaith Industries metal-topped kitchen table, Solace Army shelves, a painting by Karsh Swinehart (a storm-tossed sailboat just offshore from local Pleistocene Point, Turneresque by way of Thomas Cole).

All the beloved encumbering detritus of a life.

But a life lived to what purpose, fulfilling what early promise, juvenile dreams? All those years gone past so swiftly…

No. Maundering wouldn't cut it. No remedies to his problems in fruitless recriminations and regrets. Best to hit the streets of Carrollboro in search of some aid and comfort.

Tug shuffled into a plaid lumberjacket, red-and-black Kewbie castoff that had wandered south across the nearby border like some migrating avian apparel and onto the Solace Army Store racks, took the two poutine-redolent flights down to ground level at a mild trot, energized by his spontaneous and uncharacteristic determination to act, and emerged onto Patrician Street, an incongruously named grand-dame-gone-shabby avenue

cutting south and north through the Squirrel Hills district, and full of gloriously decaying sister buildings to The Wyandot, all built post-War, circa 1939: The Lewis and Jonathan, The Onondowaga, The Canandaigua, The Lord Fitzhugh, and half a dozen others.

Mid-October in Carrollboro: sunlight sharp as honed ice-skate blades, big irregularly gusting winds off Lake Ondiara, one of the five Grands. Sidewalks host to generally maintaining citizens, everyday contentment or focus evident, yet both attitudes tempered with the global stresses of the Big Retreat, ultimate source of Tug's own malaise. (And yet, despite his unease, Tug invariably spared enough attention to appraise all the beautiful women—and they were *all* beautiful—fashionably bundled up just enough to tease at what was beneath.)

Normally Tug enjoyed the autumn season for its crisp air and sense of annual climax, prelude to all the big holidays. Samhain, Thanksgiving, the long festive stretch that began with Roger Williams's birthday on December 21st and extended through Christmas and *La Fête des Rois*…

But this year those nostalgia-inducing attractions paled, against the harsh background of his struggle to survive.

Patrician merged with Tinsley, a more commercial district. Here, shoppers mixed with browsers admiring the big gaudy windows at Zellers and the Bay department stores, even if they couldn't make a purchase at the moment.

Carrollboro's economy was convulsing and churning in weird ways, under the Big Retreat. Adding ten percent more people to the city's population of two-hundred-thousand had both boosted and dragged down the economy, in oddly emergent ways. The newcomers were a representatively apportioned assortment of rich, poor and middle-class refugees from all around the world, sent fleeing inland by the rising seas. "Shorebirds" all, yet differently grouped.

The poor, with their varied housing and medical and educational needs, were a drain on the federal and state government finances. They had settled mostly in the impoverished Swillburg and South Wedge districts of Carrollboro.

The skilled middle-class were undercutting wages and driving up unemployment rates, as they competed with the natives for jobs in their

newly adopted region, and bought up single-family homes in Maplewood and Parkway.

And the rich—

The rich were driving longtime residents out of their unsecured rentals, as avaricious owners, seeking big returns on their investments, went luxury condo with their properties.

Properties like The Wyandot, owned by Narcisse Godbout.

Thoughts of his heinous landlord fired Tug up and made him quicken his pace.

Maybe Pavel would have some ideas that could help.

2.

Ocarina City

Just a few blocks away from the intersection of Tinsley with Grousebeck, site of the Little Theatre and Tug's destination, Tug paused before Dr. Zelda's Ocarina Warehouse, the city's biggest retailer of fipple flutes.

Carrollboro had been known as Ocarina City ever since the late 1800s.

The connection between metropolis and instrument began by chance in the winter of 1860, when an itinerant pedlar named Leander Watts passed through what was then a small town of some five-thousand inhabitants, bearing an unwanted crate full of Donati "Little Goose" fipple flutes, which Watts had grudugingly accepted in Manhattan in lieu of cash owed for some other goods. But thanks to his superb salesmanship, Watts was able to unload on the citizens of Carrollboro the whole consignment of what he regarded as useless geegaws.

In their heimal isolation and recreational desperation, the citizens of Carrollboro had latched on to the little ceramic flutes, and by spring thaw the city numbered many self-taught journeymen and master players among the populace.

From Carrollboro the fascination with ocarinas had spread nationally, spiking and dying away and spiking again over the subsequent decades, although never with such fervor as at the epicenter. There, factories and academies and music-publishing firms and cafes and concert halls and retail establishments had sprung up in abundance, lending the city its nickname and music-besotted culture.

Today the window of Dr. Zelda's held atop russet velvet cushions the Fall 2010 models from Abimbola, von Storch, Tater Innovator, Xun Fun, Charalambos, and many other makers. There were small pendant models, big two-handed transverse models, and the mammoth three-chambered types. Materials ranged from traditional ceramics to modern polycarbonates, and the surface decorations represented an eye-popping decorative range from name designers as varied as Fairey, Schorr and Mars.

Piped from outdoor speakers above the doorway came the latest ocarina hit, debuting on the Billboard charts at Number Ten, a duet from Devandra Banhart and Jack Johnson, "World Next Door."

Tug himself was a ham-fingered player at best. But his lack of skill did not deter his covetous admiration of the display of instruments. But after some few minutes of day-dreaming fascination, he turned away like a bum from a banquet.

Simply another thing he couldn't afford just now.

3.

Unplanned Obsolescence

The Art Vrille movement that had swept the globe in the 1920s and 1930s had left behind several structures in Carrollboro, not the least of which was the Little Theatre. An ornate music-box of a structure, it had plainly seen better days, with crumbling stucco ornaments, plywood replacement of lapidary enamelled tin panels, and a marquee with half its rim's lightbulbs currently missing.

Today, according to that marquee, the Little Theatre was running a matinee in one of its four rooms, subdivided from the original palace-like interior: a double feature consisting of Diana Dors in *The Girl Can't Help It* and Doris Day in *Gun Crazy*. Tug had seen both films many times before, and was glad he wasn't the projectionist for them. Tonight, though, he anticipated his duty: screening the first-run release of *Will Eisner's The Spirit*. Early reviews had Brendan Fraser nailing the role.

Tug tracked down Pavel Bilodeau in the manager's office.

The short, mid-thirty-ish fellow—casually dressed, blonde hair perpetually hayricked, plump face wearing its default expression of an elementary-school student subjected to a pop quiz on material unmastered

—was busy behind his desktop ordinateur, fingers waltzing across the numerical keypad to the right of the alpha keys. Spotting his unexpected visitor, Pavel said, “Right with you, Tug.” He triggered output from the noisy o-telex (its carriage chain needed oiling), got up, burst and shuffled together the fanfold printout, and approached Tug.

“This is a spreadsheet of the Little Theatre’s finances, Tug.”

Tug got a bad feeling from Pavel’s tone. Or rather, Tug’s recently omnipresent bad feeling deepened. “Yeah?”

“Receipts are down—way down. I’ve got to cut costs if I want to keep this place open.”

“I read about this cheap butter substitute for the popcorn concession—”

“I need bigger savings, Tug. Like your salary.”

“I’m being fired?”

Pavel had the grace to look genuinely miserable. “Laid off. Starting today. You can collect.”

Tug sank into a chair like a used-car-lot Air Dancer deprived of its fan. “But I was coming here to ask for more hours—and if you had found any leads on a place for me to stay.”

Pavel clapped a hand on Tug’s shoulder. “You know the worst now, Tug.”

Regarding his newly-ex employer, Tug suddenly realized the gap of years between them, over two decades’ worth. Pavel looked incredibly young and callow—like the growing majority of people Tug encountered lately. Kids! They were all kids these days! He tried not to let his resentment of Pavel’s relative youth and prospects surface in his voice.

“But how will you run the place without me? Dave and Jeff can’t work round-the-clock on four machines.”

“I’m installing automated digital projectors. The new Cinemeccanica o-500’s. No more film. It’s a bit of a capital investment, but it’ll pay off quickly. Jeff will handle days, and Dave nights. They’ll have to take a pay cut too. Together after the cut, they’ll still make less than you do now. They’re young and inexperienced, so they won’t mind so much. Oh, and shipping charges on the rentals come down dramatically too. The files get transmitted over CERN-space.”

“I’ll take the pay cut!”

“No, Tug, I think this is best. You wouldn’t be happy just pressing virtual buttons on a monitor screen. You’re too old-school. You’re filaments and

sprockets and triacetate, not bits and bytes and command language strings."

Tug wanted to voice more objections, to protest that he could change—but a sudden realization stilled his tongue.

What Pavel said was true. His age and attitudes had caught up with him. If he couldn't manually load the reels of film and enjoy guiding their smooth progress through the old machines for the enjoyment of the audience, he would feel useless and unfulfilled. The new technology was too sterile for him.

Tug got wearily to his feet. "All right, if that's how it's gotta be. Do I dare ask if you stumbled on any housing leads?"

"No, I haven't. It's incredible. The shorebirds have totally deranged the rental landscape. But listen, here's what I can offer. You can store all your stuff in the basement here for as long as you want."

The basement of the Little Theatre was a huge labyrinth of unused storage space, save for some ancient props from the days of the live-performer Salmagundi Circuit.

"Okay, that's better than nothing. Thanks for all the years of employment, Pavel. The Little Theatre always felt like my second home."

"Just think of it as leaving the nest at last, Tug. It's gonna work out fine. Bigger and better things ahead."

Tug wished he could be as optimistic as Pavel, but right this minute he felt lower than Carole Lombard's morals in *Baby Face*.

4.

Trash Platter Chatter

Hangdogging his way through the lobby, Tug ran into the Little Theater's lone janitor and custodian.

Pieter van Tuyll van Serooskerken was a Dikelander. Like a surprisingly uniform number of his countrymen and countrywomen, Pieter was astonishingly tall and fair-skinned. In the average crowd of native brunette and ruddy-faced Carrollborovians, he resembled a stalk of white asparagus set amid a handful of radishes. Today, alone in the lobby and leaning daydreamily on his broom, he seemed like a lone droopy stalk tethered to a supportive stake.

Pieter's native country had been one of the first to collapse under the rising oceans. Dikeland now existed mostly underwater, its government in exile, its citizens dispersed across the planet. The Dikelanders were among the longest-settled Big Retreat immigrants in Carrollboro and elsewhere in the USA, hardly considered an exotic novelty any longer.

Back home, Pieter had been a doctor. Informed, upon relocation to America, of the long tedious bureaucratic process necessary to requalify, he had opted out of the prestigious field, although still young, hale and optimally productive. Tug suspected that Pieter's discovery of Sal-D, or Ska Pastora, had contributed to his career change. Blissfully high throughout much of each day and night on quantities of Shepherdess that would turn a novice user's brain to guava jelly, Pieter found janitorial work more his speed.

With a paradoxically languid and unfocused acuity, Pieter now unfolded himself and hailed Tug.

"Hey, Ginger Ale."

Pieter, in his perfect, nearly accentless yet still oddly alien English, was the only person who ever called Tug Gingerella by that nickname. The Dikelander seemed to derive immense absurdist humor from it.

"Hey, Pete. What's new?"

"I have almost gotten 'Radar Love' down. Apex of Dikelander hillbilly-skiffle music. Wanna hear?"

Pieter drew a pendant ocarina from beneath his work vest and began to raise it to his lips.

"Naw, Pete, I'm just not in the mood right now."

"How is that?"

Tug explained all his troubles, starting with his eviction and culminating in his dismissal from the Little Theatre.

Pieter seemed truly moved. "Aw, man, that sucks so bad. Listen, we approach lunchtime. Let me treat you to a trash platter, and we can talk things through."

Tug began perforce to salivate at the mention of the Carrollboro gastronomic speciality. "Okay, that's swell of you, Pete."

"So long as *I* still possess a paycheck, why not?"

Pieter stood his broom up in a corner with loving precision, found a coat in the cloakroom—not necessarily his own, judging by the misfit, Tug

guessed—and led the way five blocks south to the Hatch Suit Nook.

The clean and simple proletarian ambiance of the big diner instantly soothed Tug's nerves. Established nearly a century ago, the place ranked high in Carrollboro traditions. Tug had been dining here since childhood. (Thoughts of his departed folks engendered a momentary sweet yet faded sorrow, but then the enzymatic call of his stomach overpowered the old emotions.) Amidst the jolly noise of the customers, Tug and Pieter found seats at the counter.

Composing one's trash platter was an art. The dish consisted of the eater's choice of cheeseburger, hamburger, red hots, white hots, Italian sausage, chicken tender, haddock, fried ham, grilled cheese, or eggs; and two sides of either home fries, French fries, baked beans, or macaroni salad. Atop the whole toothsome farrago could be deposited mustard, onions, ketchup, and a proprietary greasy hot sauce of heavily spiced ground beef. The finishing touch: Italian toast.

Pieter and Tug ordered. While they were waiting, Pieter took out his pipe. Tug was appalled.

"You're not going to smoke that here, are you?"

"Why not? The practice is perfectly legal."

"But you'll give everyone around us a contact high."

"Nobody cares but you, Ginger Ale. And if they do, they can move off. This helps me think. And your fix demands a lot of thinking."

Pieter fired up and, as he predicted, no neighbors objected. But they were all younger than Tug. Another sign of his antiquity, he supposed.

After a few puffs of Shepherdess, Pieter said, "You could come live with me."

Pieter lived with two women, Georgia and Carolina, commonly refered to as "The Dixie Twins," although they were unrelated, looked nothing alike, and hailed from Massachusetts. Tug had never precisely parsed the exact relations among the trio, and suspected that Pieter and the Dixie Twins themselve would have been hard-pressed to define their menage.

"Again, that's real generous of you, Pete. But I don't think I'd be comfortable freeloading in your apartment."

Pieter shrugged. "Your call."

The trash platters arrived then, and further discussion awaited whole-hearted ingestion of the jumbled mock-garbage ambrosia….

Pieter wiped his grease-smeared face with a paper napkin and took up his smoldering pipe from the built-in countertop ashtray. Sated, Tub performed his own ablutions. A good meal was a temporary buttress against all misfortunes….

“Maybe you could live with Olive.”

Tug’s ease instantly evaporated, to be replaced by a crimson mélange of guilt, frustration, anger and shame: the standard emotional recipe for his post-breakup dealings with Olive Ridley.

“That—that is not a viable idea, Pete. I’m sorry, it’s just not.”

“You and Olive had a lot going for you. Everybody said so.”

“Yeah, we had almost as much going for us as we had against. There’s no way I’m going to ask her for any charity.”

Pete issued hallucinogenic smoke rings toward the diner’s ceiling. His eyes assumed a glazed opacity lucid with reflections of a sourceless starlight.

“Tom Pudding.”

Tug scanned the menu board posted above the grill. “Is that a dessert? I don’t see—”

Pieter jabbed Tug in the chest with the stem of his pipe. “Wake up! The *Tom Pudding*. It’s a boat. An old canal barge, anchored on the Attawandaron. People are using it as a squat. Some guy named Vasterling runs it. He fixed it all up. Supposed to be real nice.”

Tug pondered the possibilities. A radical recasting of his existence, new people, new circumstances…. Life on a houseboat, rent-free. The romantic, history-soaked vista of the Attawandaron Canal. Currier & Ives engravings of grassy towpath, overhanging willow trees, merry bargemen singing as they hefted bales and crates—

“I’ll do it! Thanks, Pete!”

But Pieter had already lost interest in Tug and his plight, the Dikelander’s Shepherdess-transmogrified proleptic attention directed elsewhere. “Yeah, cool, great.”

Tug helped his hazey-dazey friend stand and don his coat. They headed toward the exit.

Pieter stopped suddenly short and goggled in amazement at nothing visible to Tug. Other customers strained to see whatever had so potently transfixed the Dikelander.

“A Nubian! I see a Nubian princess! She’s here, here in Carrollboro!”

“A Nubian princess? You mean, like a black woman? From Africa?”

“Yes!”

Tug scratched his head. “What would a black woman be doing in Carrollboro? I’ve never seen one here in my whole life, have you?”

5.

Moving Day Morn

After his impulsive decision at the Hatch Suit Nook—a decision to abandon all his old ways for a footloose lifestyle—Tug had nervous second thoughts. So in the two weeks left until his scheduled eviction on November first, he searched for a new job. But the surge of competing talented shorebirds made slots sparse.

Tug’s best chance, he thought, had come at the Aristo Nodak Company. That large, long-established national firm, purveyor of all things photographic, ran a film archive and theater, mounting retrospective festivals of classic features, everything from Hollywood spectacles such as *Elizabeth Taylor’s Salammbô* to indie productions like Carolee Schneemann’s avant-garde home movies of the 1960s, featuring her hillbilly-skiffle-playing husband John Lennon. With their emphasis on old-school materials, there’d be no nonsense about Cinemeccanica o-500’s. But despite a sympathetic and well-carried interview, Tug had come in second for the lone projectionist job to a Brit shorebird who had worked for the drowned Elstree Studios.

Despondent at the first rejection, Tug had immediately quit looking. That was how he always reacted, he ruefully acknowledged. One blow, and he was down for the count. Take his only serious adult romantic relationship, with Olive. The disintegration of that affair a few years ago had left him entirely hors de combat on the fields of Venus.

But what could he do now about this fatal trait? He was too damn old to change….

Tug didn’t own a fancy o-phone or even a cheap laptop ordinateur. The hard drive on his old desktop model had cratered a year ago, and he had been too broke to replace the machine. Consequently, he used a local o-café, The Happy Applet, to manage his sparse o-mail and to surf CERN-

space. A week before his scheduled eviction, he went to Craig's List and posted a plea for help with getting his possessions over to the Little Theatre. Too proud and ashamed to approach his friends directly, Tug hoped that at least one or two people would show up.

Far from that meager attendance, he got a massive turnout.

The morning of October 31st dawned bright, crisp and white as Jack Frost's bedsheets, thanks to an early dusting of snow. (The altered climate had pushed the typical wintry autumn weather of Tug's youth back into December, and he regarded this rare October snow, however transitory, as a good omen.) After abandoning his futile job search, Tug had furiously boxed all his treasured possessions, donating quite a bit to Goodfaith Industries. Handling all the accumulated wrack of thirty years left him simultaneously depressed and nostalgic. He had set aside a smattering of essential clothes, toiletries and touchstones, stuffing them all into a beat-up North Face backpack resurrected from deep within a closet, token of his quondam affiliation with a hiking club out near Palmyra.

At six AM he sat on a box at a window looking down at Patrician Street, backpack nestled between his feet, sipping a takeout coffee. An hour later, just when he had prematurely convinced himself no one was coming, the caravan arrived: miscellaneous trucks and cars to the number of a dozen. Out of them tumbled sleepy-eyed friends, acquaintances and strangers.

Jeff, Dave, Pavel and Pieter from the Little Theatre. Tug's second cousin, Nick, all the way from Bisonville. Brenda and Irene, baristas from The Happy Applet. Those nerdy guys with whom for a few years he had traded holo transects of rare Salmagundi Circuit novelty tunes. The kid who sold him his deli lunch each day and who had had an obsession with Helen Gahagan ever since Tug had introduced the kid to her performance in *The Girl in the Golden Atom*. And others, of deeper or shallower intimacy.

Including—yes, that fireplug of a figure was indeed Olive Ridley.

6.

Old Habits Die Hard

Tug hastened down the stairs, and was greeted with loud acclamations. Smiling broadly yet a bit nervously at this unexpected testament to his social connectivity, he nodded to Olive but made no big deal of her

presence. Someone pressed a jelly doughnut and a fresh coffee into his hands, and he scarfed them down. Then the exodus began in earnest.

The first sweaty shuttling delivered nearly half his stuff to the basement of the old movie palace. Then came a refreshment break, with everyone gently ribbing Tug about this sea-change in his staid life, and subtly expressing their concern for his future, expressions he made light of, despite his own doubts. The second transfer netted everything out of the melancholy, gone-ghostly apartment except about a dozen small boxes. These were loaded into a single car. Sandwiches and pizza and drinks made the rounds, and a final salvo of noontide farewells.

Then Tug was left alone with Olive, whose car, he finally realized, bore the last of his freight.

But before he could expostulate, Narcisse Godbout arrived on the scene in his battered Burroughs Econoline van.

Born some seventy years ago in Montreal, the fat, grizzled, foul-mouthed Kewbie wore his usual crappy cardigan over flannel shirt, stained grey wool pants and scuffed brogans. Although resident in Carrollboro for longer than his Montreal upbringing, he had never lost his accent. For thirty years he had been Tug's landlord, a semi-distant albeit intermittently thorny source of irritation. Godbout's reasonable rents had been counterbalanced by his sloth, derision and ham-handed repairs. To preserve his below-market rent, Tug had always been forced to placate and curry the man's curdmudgeonly opinions. And now, of course, with his decision to evict Tug, Godbout had shifted the balance of his reputation to that of extremely inutile slime.

"You got dose fucking keys, eh, Gingerella?"

Tug experienced a wave of violent humiliation, the culmination of three decades of kowtowing and forelock-tugging. He dug the apartment keys from his pocket and threw them at Godbout's feet into the slush. Then Tug summoned up the worst insult he could imagine.

"You—you *latifundian*!"

Yes, it fit. Like some peon laboring without rights or privileges for the high-hatted owner of some Brazilian plantation, Tug had been subservient to the economic might of this property-owner for too long. But now he was free!

Tug's brilliant insult, however, failed to register with Godbout or faze the ignorant fellow. Grunting, he stooped for the keys, and for a moment Tug

expected him to have a heart attack. But such perfect justice was not in the cards. An unrepentant Godbout merely said, “Now I get a better class of tenant, me. Good goddamn riddance to all you boho dogshits.”

The landlord drove off before Tug could formulate a comeback.

Leaving Tug once again alone with Olive.

Short and stout and a few years younger than Tug, Olive Ridley favored unadorned smock dresses in various dull colors of a burlap-type fabric Tug had never seen elsewhere, at least outside of barnyard settings, complemented by woolly tights of paradoxically vivid hues and ballet-slipper flats. She wore her long grey-flecked black hair in a single braid thick as a hawser. Her large plastic-framed glasses lent her face an owlish aspect.

Tug and Olive had met and bonded over their love of vintage postcards, bumping into each other at an ephemera convention, chatting tentatively, then adjouring for a coffee at a nearby branch of Seattle’s ubiquitous Il Giornale chain. Subsequent outings found them exploring a host of other mutual interests: from movies, of course, through the vocal stylings of the elderly Hank Williams. Their middle-aged, cool-blooded romance, such as it was, progressed through retrospectively definable stages of intimacy until moving in together seemed inevitable.

But cohabitation disclosed a plethora of intractable quirks, crotchets, demands and minor vices held by both partners, fossilized abrasive behavior patterns that rendered each lover unfit for longterm proximity—at least with each other.

Three years after putting her collection of Felix the Cat figurines—including the ultra-rare one depicting Felix with Fowlton Means’ Waldo—on Tug’s shelves, Olive was tearfully shrouding them in bubblewrap.

Despite this heavy history, Tug vowed now to deal with Olive with neutral respect. She had worked hard all morning to help him move, and now obviously sought some kind of rapprochement.

Olive’s words bore out Tug’s intuition.

“I wanted to have some time for just us, Tug. I thought we could grab some ice cream at Don’s Original, and talk a little.”

Don’s Original had been their favorite place as a couple. Tug was touched.

“That—that’s very kind of you, Olive. Let’s go.” Tug tossed his pack in the car, and climbed in.

The drive to Culver Road took only a few minutes. (With no car of his own, Tug felt weird to be transiting the city in this unaccustomed fashion.) They mostly spoke of the inarguable: what a Grade-A jerk Narcisse Godbout had unsurprisingly proved himself to be.

Inside Don’s, Tug and Olive both paused for a sentimental moment in front of the Banana Split Memorial. Fashioned of realistic-looking molded and colored silicone, like faux sushi, the dusty monument never failed to bring a sniffle to any viewer of a certain age.

Forty years ago, the beloved and familiar Cavendish banana—big creamy delicious golden-skinned monocultured artifact of mankind’s breeding genius—had gone irrevocably extinct, victim of the triple-threat of Tropical Race 4, Black Sigatoka, and Banana Bunchy Top Virus. In the intervening decades, alternative cultivars had been brought to market. Feeble, tiny, ugly, drab, and starchy as their plantain cousin, these banana substitutes had met with universal disdain from consumers, who recalled the unduplicatable delights of the Cavendish.

Tug’s own childhood memories of banana-eating were as vivid as any of his peers’. How thoughtlessly and gluttonously they had gorged on the fruit, little anticipating its demise! Sometimes after all these years of abstinence he believed he could not recall the exact taste of a banana. Yet at other unpredictable moments, his mouth flooded with the familiar taste.

But this particular moment, despite the proximity of the banana simulacrum, did not provide any such Proustian occasion.

Tug and Olive found a booth, ordered sundaes, and sat silent for a moment, before Olive asked, “Tug, precisely what are you doing with yourself?”

“I—I don’t know exactly. I’m just trying to go with the flow.”

“Squatting with a bunch of strangers—yes, Pete told me about it—is not exactly a longterm plan.”

“I’m thinking…maybe I can write now. Now that I’ve shed everything that kept me down. You know I’ve always wanted to write. About movies, music, my everyday life—”

Olive’s look of disgust recalled too many similar, rankling moments of harsh condemnation, and Tug had to suppress an immediate tart rejoinder.

“Oh, Tug, you could have written at any time in the past twenty years. But you let those early rejections get to you, and you just caved in and gave up.”

Unspeaking, Tug poked pensively and peevishly at his melting ice cream. Then he said, “Can you drop me off in Henrietta? I’ve got to find the *Tom Pudding*.”

7.

In Pursuit of the *Tom Pudding*

At its inception the Attawandaron Canal had stretched unbroken for nearly four hundred miles, from Beverwyck on the Hudson River, the state’s capital, all the way to Bisonville on the shores of Lake Attawandaron, another of the Grands. Constructed in the mid-1800s during the two terms of President Daniel Webster, the Canal had been an engineering wonder, and came to occupy a massive place in American history books, having opened up the Midwest to commerce with the established East, and also generated an immense folklore, still fondly recalled. The Canal Monster, Michel Phinckx, Sam Patch, and other archetypes. Bypassed now by other modes of transport, chopped by development into long and short segments, the old Canal had become a recreational resource and prominent talismanic presence in Carrollboro and environs.

Tug had chosen the Henrietta district as a likely starting point for his search for the *Tom Pudding*. Beginning at Carrollboro’s city lines where the Canal entered town, he would follow its riverine length until he encountered the utopic loafer’s haven limned by Pete.

Tug waved goodbye to Olive’s dwindling rear-view mirror, shouldered his pack, and looked at the westering sun. Their trip to the Little Theatre to drop off Tug’s last load of stuff had chewed up more time. Now he had barely a few hours before frosty autumnal dusk descended. No plans for how to spend the night. Better get moving.

Tug’s earlier whimsy of inhabiting a vanished Currier & Ives era intermittently materialized as he began to hike the Canal. Stretches of the original towpath, paved or not, served as a bike and pedestrian trail, alongside the somnolent unworking waters channeled between meticulously joined stone walls, labor of a thousand anonymous Irish and Krakówvian

workers. The mechanisms of the old locks hulked like rusted automatons. The whole scene radiated a melancholy desuetude most pleasing to Tug. Something older even than him, yet still useful in its decrepit fashion.

Of course, at other points the Canal fought with modernity—and lost. It vanished under grafitti'd bridges or potholed pavement, was pinched between ominous warehouses, paralleled by gritty train tracks: a Blakean straitened undine.

Tug was brought up short at one point as the canal slipped liquidly beneath a razor-wire-topped fence surrounding an extensive auto junkyard. Furious big dogs hurled themselves at the chainlink, bowing it outward and causing Tug to stumble backwards. He worked his way around the junkyard by gritty alleys and continued on.

By ten PM exhaustion had set in. The neighborhood around him held no familiar landmarks, a part of Carrollboro unvisited by Tug before, despite his long tenure in the city. He found a Tim Horton's open all night, bought a coffee and donut as requisite for occupying a booth unmolested by the help. But the desultory kids behind the counter cared little about his tenancy anyhow. He drowsed on and off, dreaming of a Narcisse Godbout big as a mountain, up whose damp woolen flank Tug had to scrabble.

In the morning, he performed some rudimentary ablutions in the donut shop rest room, his mouth tasting like post-digested but pre-processed civet-cat coffee beans. Then he went on hunting the elusive barge full of slackers.

He made it all the way out past Greece Canal Park to Spencerport, before deciding that it was unlikely for the *Tom Pudding* to be berthed further away. Then he turned around and began wearily to retrace his steps, following the fragments of the Attawandaron Canal as if he were Hansel lacking a Gretel, seeking a way home.

Luckily that day featured pleasant weather. Tug had a pocket full of cash, his first unemployment money, so he was able to eat well. He even took a shower at Carrollboro's downtown branch of the Medicine Lodge, changed his underwear, and dozed in the kiva chapel with some winos, despite the shaman's chants and the rattle of his gourds.

Tug extended his search beyond Henrietta. No luck. He spent the night in another Tim Horton's, emerging smelling like a stale cruller.

Eliminating the unlikely distal regions, the third day saw him repeat the whole central portion of his fruitless quest, traversing every accessible inch

of the Canal without seeing so much as the *Tom Pudding*'s oil slick.

When dusk arrived, Tug found himself at the edge of the sprawling park adjacent to the University of Carrollboro in the city's center, one hundred acres of path-laced greenery, wild as Nature intended in spots.

Slumped against a foliage-rich oak tree atop a dry carpet of last year's leaves (trees stayed seasonally green longer these days), Tug polished off a can of Coke. Disspirited and ennervated, he mused on this latest failure.

Why hadn't he gotten Pete to nail down the location of the *Tom Pudding*? If the place was unknown, he should have discarded the option, despite its romantic allure. But having chosen to search, why couldn't he accomplish this simple task? It was as if the world always turned a cold shoulder to him. Why couldn't he ingratiate himself with anyone? Was he too prickly, too proud? Would he die a bitter, lonely, unrequited fellow?

Tug's thoughts turned to a wordless pall along with the descent of darkness. He stewed for several hours.

Then lilting ocarina music infiltrated his blue funk.

Tug had heard ocarina music intermittently for the past three days: from street musicians, lunchtime amateurs, kids in playgrounds, commercial loudspeakers. Fipple flute music provided the background buzz of Ocarina City, and he mostly paid little attention to it.

But he had never heard an ocarina sound like this. The music conjured up vivid pictures of foreign locales, an almost sensory buzz.

From out the bushes of the park emerged a dim figure, source of the strangely gorgeous sounds. Tug strained his eyes—

He saw Pete's Nubian Princess.

The black woman was bundled up against the cold in a crazyquilt assortment of shawls and scarves. Tug suspected the patterned garments would be gaudy and colorful by day. Lithe, tall, thin, she moved like a swaying giraffe. Her indistinctly perceived facial features seemed more Arabic or Semitic than Negroid. Her hair was a dandelion explosion.

She stopped a few yards away from Tug and continued to play, a haunting melody unfamiliar to the man.

Tug got to his feet. What were the odds he'd encounter such an exotic creature, given that the whole of North America hosted perhaps only ten thousand Africans at any given moment, and those mostly diplomats and businessmen? Could she be a foreign student attending Carrollboro's

University? Unlikely, given the prestige of schools in Songhai, Kanen-Bornu and the Oyo Empire. Nor was it likely she'd be a shorebird, given that Africa's displaced coastal citizens had all been taken care of at home.

Tug took a step toward the outré apparition. The woman ceased playing, smiled (teeth very white against dark skin), turned, then resumed playing and began to walk into the undergrowth.

Tug could do nothing but follow. Had not an ounce of will left otherwise.

Deeper into the park she led him. Tug could smell water. But not the semi-stagnant Canal water. Fresh, running water. He realized that they must be approaching the Cunhestiyuh River as it cut through the park and city.

Sure enough, they were soon at its banks, and could not cross. The woman led the way leftward along the shore until they reached a line of thick growth perpendicular to the river. Employing a non-obvious gap amidst the trees and bushes, she stepped through, Tug just steps behind.

No more ocarina music, and the woman had vanished.

Tug became more aware of his surroundings, as if awaking from a dream.

He stood on the edge of an artificial embankment. He suddenly realized the nature of the spot.

The Attawandaron Canal had been connected to the Cunhestiyuh River at intervals by short feeder canals, to refresh its flow. This was one such. A leaky yet still mostly functioning feedgate on the riverside was still in place, barring ingress of the River and making for a low water level in the feeder chute. Entering the Canal on the opposite side from the towpath, this feeder inlet, perhaps overgrown on its far end too, had been totally overlooked by Tug in his quest.

Tug looked down.

Nearly filling the narrow channel, the *Tom Pudding* floated below, lit up like an Oktoberfest beer garden with colored fairy lights, its deck busy with people. A ladder ran from top of the feeder canal on down to the barge's broad roof.

A fiar-haired man looked up then and spotted Tug. The man said, "Pellenera's brought us another one. Hey, pal, c'mon down!"

8.

Vasterling's Mad and Marvelous Menagerie

The planning and rehearsing for the quantum physics chautauqua were complete. A vote among the barge's citizens had affixed the title of "Mystery Mother and Her Magic Membranes" onto the production, passing over such contenders as "The Heterotic Revue;" "Branes! Branes! Escape from the Zombie Universe;" "I've Got the Worlds on a String;" and "Witten It Be Nice? Some Good Sub-Planckian Vibrations."

The one and only performance of the educational saturnalia was scheduled for this very night, at the Carrollboro venue that generally hosted visiting chautauquas, the Keith Vawter Memorial Auditorium. Franchot Galliard had paid for the rental of the space, reluctantly tapping into his deep family fortunes, despite an inherent miserliness that had caused him, about four years previously, to purchase the *Tom Pudding* at scrapyard prices and take up residence aboard, whilst leasing out his Ellwanger Barry-district mansion at exorbitant rates to rich shorebirds.

Oswaldo Vasterling was just that persuasive.

The young visionary self-appointed captain of the permanently moored barge full of oddballs could have herded cats into swimming pool, Tug believed. Short and roly-poly, his complexion a diluted Mediterranean olive hue, the stone-faced twenty-one-year-old struck most first-time interlocutors as unprepossessing in the extreme. (Tug suspected a bit of Asperger's, affected or otherwise, in Vasterling's character.)

Gorm Vasterling, Oswaldo's Dad, had been an unmarried Dikelander resident in Fourierist Russia, an agriculture specialist. When the Omniarch of the Kiev Phalanx ordered Gorm to transplant his talents to Cuba, to aid the Fourierist brethren there, Gorm instantly obeyed.

Upon relocation to Cuba, Gorm's Dikelander genes almost immediately combined with the Latina genes of Ximena Alcaron, a Fourier Passionologist specializing in Animic Rehabilitation. The result was a stubby, incipiently mustachio'd child who had received the least appealing somatic traits of each parent.

But in brainpower, little Oswaldo was not scanted.

Some three years ago, in 2007, at age eighteen, educationally accelerated Oswaldo was already doing post-doc work in M-theory with Lee Smolin at the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics, a semi-independent think-tank headquartered on the campus of Carrollboro U. But Smolin and his star

student had clashed violently over some abstruse quantum heresy, and Oswaldo Vasterling had been cast out from the sanctum.

He hadn't gone far, though, ending up just a mile or so away from the campus, serendipitously stumbling upon Franchot Galliard's welcoming barge. There, he commandeered several rooms as his lab-cum-sleeping quarters and set up a rococo experimental apparatus resembling the mutant offspring of a Portajohn and a digital harmonium, attached to a small-scale radio-telescope, a gravity-wave interferometer, and a bank of networked ordinateurs, the whole intended to replicate what he had left behind at the PITP.

Forever short of money for his unperfected equipment, he perpetually harrassed the stingy Galliard for dough, generally with little success, and inveigled everyone else onboard to participate in money-raising schemes, of which the chautauqua was the latest. (The city had been plastered with advertisements, both wheat-pasted and CERN-spaced, and if Oswaldo's show filled half of Vawter's seats with paying customers, he'd net a hefty sum—especially since all the performers were volunteers.)

But the mixed-media performance also stood as Oswaldo's intended refutation of his ex-comrades at the PITP. He had invited them all to witness his theories rendered in music and dance, light and sound, hoping they would repent and acknowledge the Vasterling genius. And his quondam colleagues had accepted en masse, in the spirit of those anticipating a good intellectual brawl.

Tug's part in this affair? He had been placed in charge of stage lighting, on the crack-brained logic that he had worked before with machines that projected light. Luckily, the boards at the Vawter were old-fashioned, non-o consoles, and Tug had mastered them easily in a few rehearsals, leaving him confident he could do his part to bring off "Mystery Mother and Her Magic Membranes" successfully.

So in the hours remaining before showtime, Tug had little to do save hang out with Sukey Damariscotta. He looked for her now.

The vast open cargo interior of the old decommissioned barge had been transformed over the past four years into a jerry-built, multi-level warren of sleeping, dining, working and recreational spaces by the resident amateur carpenters (and by one former professional, the surly alcoholic Don Rippey, who managed just barely to ensure that every load-bearing structure met

minimal standards for non-collapse, that the stolen electricity was not fed directly into, say, the entire hull, and that the equally purloined plumbing did not mix inflow with outflow). Consequently, there were no straight paths among the quarters, and finding anyone involved something just short of solving the Traveling Voyageur problem.

If the layout of the *Tom Pudding* remained still obscure to Tug even after a month's habitation, he felt he finally had a pretty good fix on most of the recomplicated interpersonal topography of the barge. But initially, that feature too had presented an opaque façade.

Hailed from the barge that night of discovery, Tug had descended the ladder into a clamorous reception from a few dozen curious strangers. Supplied, sans questioning, with a meal, several stiff drinks and a bunk, he had fallen straight asleep.

In the morning, Tug stumbled upon the same fellow who had first spotted him. Brewing coffee, the ruggedly handsome guy introduced himself as Harmon Frawley. Younger than Tug by a decade or more, boyish beyond his years, Frawley had been an ad copywriter in Toronto until a painful divorce, after which he had gone footloose and impoverishedly free. He still favored his old wardrobe of Brooks Brothers shirts and trousers, but they were getting mighty beat.

Sipping coffee and running a big hand through his blond bangs, Harmon explained the origin, ethos and crew of the *Tom Pudding* to Tug.

"So Galliard owns this floating commune, but Vasterling is the boss?"

"Right. Insofar as anyone is. Call Ozzie the 'Prime Mover' if you need a more accurate title. Frankie just wants to be left alone with his collection."

When Tug eventually met Franchot Galliard, he was instantly reminded of Adolphe Menjou in his starring role in *Where the Blue Begins*, lugubrious canine makeup and all. Galliard's penchant for antique eight-millimeter stag films, especially those starring the young Nancy Davis, struck Tug as somewhat unhealthy, and he was glad the rich collector knew how to operate his own projector. Still, who was he to criticize any man's passion?

"And he doesn't care who crashes here?"

"Not at all! So long as it doesn't cost him anything. But you know, not many people find us here. And even the ones who do don't always stay. The hardcores are special. Particularly since Pellenera showed up."

Mention of the enigmatic Nubian Pied Piper sent mystical frissons down Tug's spine. The story of her origin lacked no complementary mystery or romance.

"It was a dark and stormy night. Really. About six months ago, sometime in May. Ozzie announced that he was gonna power up his brane-buster for the first time. Bunch of us gathered down in his lab around midnight. Boat was rocking like JFK trying to solve the Cuban Seafloor Colony Crisis. So Ozzie straps himself in and starts playing the keys of that electronic harmonium thingy that's at the core of the device. Weirdest music you've ever heard. Flashing lights, burning smells, the sound of about a dozen popping components self-destructing simultaneously— Then the inside of the booth part of the gizmo goes all smoky-hazy-like, and out pops this naked African chick! She looks around for a few seconds, not scared, just amazed, says a few words no one understands, then runs off into the night!"

Tug's erotic imagination supplied all too vividly the image of the naked ebony charms of Pellenera—conjured up a picture so distracting that he missed the next few words from Harmon Frawley.

"—Janey Vogelsang. She was the first one Pellenera led back here, a week later. Marcello named her that, by the way. Just means 'black hide.' And you're, oh, about the tenth."

"And she never speaks?"

"Not since that first night. She just plays that demon ocarina. You ever heard the like?"

"Never."

Harmon scratched his manly chin. "Why she's leading people here, how she chooses 'em—that's anybody's guess."

"Does she live onboard?"

"Nope. Roams the city, so far as anyone can tell."

And so Tug entered the society of the *Tom Pudding* as one cryptically annointed.

He came now to a darkened TV room, whose walls, floor and ceiling had been carpeted with heterogenous scavenged remnants. An old console set dominated a couch on which were crowded Iona Draggerman, Jura Burris and Turk Vanson.

"Hey, Tug, join us! We're watching *Vajayjay and Badonkadonk*!"

“It’s that episode where Vajayjay’s relatives visit from India and have to go on a possum hunt!”

The antics of Kaz’s animated Hindi cat and Appalachian mule, while generally amusing, held no immediate allure for Tug.

“Aren’t you guys playing the part of quarks tonight? Shouldn’t you be getting your costumes ready?”

“We’ve got hours yet!”

“We don’t dance every time Ozzie pulls our strings!”

Tug moved on, past various uncanny or domestic tableaux, including the always spooky incense-fueled devotional practice of Tatang, the mono-named shorebird from the sunken Kiribati Islands.

At last he found Sukey Damariscotta, sitting all bundled up and cross-legged in a director’s chair on deck, sketching trees upon the shoreline.

Only twenty-four, Sukey possessed a preternatural confidence derived from her autodidactic artistic prowess. Tug had never met anyone so capable of both meticulous fine art and fluent cartooning.

Sukey’s heritage included more Amerind blood than most other Americans possessed. In her, the old diffuse and diluted aboriginal strains absorbed by generations of colonists had recombined to birth a classic pre-Columbian beauty, all cheekbones, bronze skin and coal-black hair, styled somewhat incongruously in a Dead Rabbits tough-girl cut repopularized recently by pennywhistlers the Pogues.

Tug was more than a little in love with the talented and personable young woman, but had dared say nothing to her of his feelings so far.

Dropping down to the December-cold deck, Tug admired the drawing. “Sweet. I like the lines of that beech tree.”

Sukey accepted the praise without false humilty or ego. “Thanks. Hey, remember those caricatures I was working on?”

Sukey’s cartoon captures of the cast of the ongoing *Tom Pudding* farcical drama managed to nail their personalities in a minimum of brisk, economical lines. Tug had been a little taken aback when she showed him his own depiction. Did he really look like such a craggy, aged misanthrope? But in the end, he had to confess the likeness.

“Sure. You added any new ones?”

Sukey tucked her charcoal stick behind one ear and flipped the pages of her sketchbook.

Tug confronted an image of Pellenera in the guise of the enormous demi-barebreasted Statue of Marianne on her island home in New York Harbor. The statue's fixed pose of torch held aloft had been modified to feature Pellenera cradling all the infantilized *Tom Pudding* crew to her bosom.

When Tug had finished laughing, he said, "Hey, you ever gotten interested in bande dessinée? With an image like that, you're halfway there."

"Oh, I can't tell a story to save my life."

"Well, what if we collaborate? Here, give me that pad and a pencil, and I'll rough something out."

"What's the story going to be about?"

"It'll be about—about life in Carrollboro."

Tug scrawled a three-by-three matrix of panels and, suddenly inspired, began populating them with stick figures and word balloons.

Sukey leaned in close, and Tug could smell intoxicating scents of raw woodsmoke and wild weather tangled in her hair.

9.

"More ocarina!"

Tug had never been subjected to a one-on-one confrontation with Oswaldo Vasterling before. The circumstances of their first dialogue added a certain surreal quality to what would, in the best of conditions, have been a bit of an unnerving trial.

The two men stood in a semi-secluded corner backstage at the Keith Vawter Memorial Auditorium, illuminated only by the dimmest of caged worklights that seemed to throw more shadows than photons. All around them was a chaos one could only hope would exhibit emergent properties soon.

Don Rippey was bellowing at people assembling a set: "Have any of you guys ever even *seen* a hammer before?!?"

Janey Vogelsang was trying to make adjustments to two costumes at once: "No, no, your arrow sash has to go *counter*clockwise if you're a gluon!"

Turk Vanson was coaching a chorus of ocarina players. "Why the hell did I bother writing out the tablatures if you never even studied them!?!"

Crowds of other actors and dancers and musicians and crew-bosses and directors and makeup artists and stagehands and techies surged around these

knots of haranguers and haranguees in the usual pre-chautauqua madness.

But Ozzie remained focused and indifferent to the tumult, in a most unnatural fashion. His lack of affect disturbed Tug. Despite Ozzie's youth and a certain immaturity, he could appear ageless and deep as a well. Now, with Sphinxlike expression undermined only slightly by the juvenile wispy mustache, he had Tug pinned down with machine-gun questions.

"You're sure you know all your cues? Did you replace those torn gels? What about that multiple spotlight effect I specified during the Boson Ballet?"

"It's all under control, Ozzie. The last run-through was perfect."

Oswaldo appeared slightly mollified, though still dubious. "You'd better be right. A lot is depending on this. And I won't be here to supervise every minute of the production."

"You won't be? I thought this spectacle was going to be your shining moment. Where are you going?"

The pudgy genius realized he had revealed something secret, and showed a second's rare disconcertment. "None of your business."

Oswaldo Vasterling turned away from Tug, then suddenly swung back, exhibiting the most emotion Tug had yet witnessed in the enigmatic fellow.

"Gingerella, do you like this world?"

Tug's turn to feel nonplussed. "Do I like this world? Well, yeah, I guess so… It's a pretty decent place. Things don't always fall out in my favor, or the way I'd wish. I lost my job and my home just a month ago. But everyone has ups and downs, right? And besides, what choice do I have?"

Oswaldo stared intently at Tug. "I don't think you really *do* care for this universe. I think you're like *me*. You see, I know this world for what it is—a fallen place, a botch, an imperfect reflection of a higher reality and a better place. And as for choices—well, time will tell."

On that note, Oswaldo Vasterling scuttled off like Professor T. E. Wogglebug in Baum's *The Vizier of Cockaigne*.

Tug shook his head in puzzlement at this Gnostic Gnonsense, then checked his watch. He had time for one last curtain-parting peek out front.

The well-lighted auditorium was about a third full, with lots more people flowing in. Ozzie might make his nut after all, allowing him to continue with his crazy experiments….

Hey, a bunch of Tug's old crowd! Pete, Pavel, Olive—essentially, everyone who had helped him move out of The Wyandot. Accidental manifestation, or solidarity with their old pal?

Wow, that move seemed ages ago. Tug experienced a momentary twinge of guilt. He really needed to reconnect with them all. That mass o-mail telling them he was okay and not to worry had been pretty bush league. But the *Tom Pudding* experience had utterly superseded his old life, as if he had moved to another country, leaving the patterns of decades to evanesce like phantoms upon the dawn….

Tug recognized Lee Smolin in another section of seats, surrounded by a claque of bearded nerds. The physicist's phiz was familiar, the man having attained a certain public profile with his CBC documentaries such as *The Universal Elegance*….

The voice of Harmon Frawley, director-in-chief, rang out, "Places, everyone!"

Tug hastened back to his boards.

He found Sukey Damirscotta waiting there. She wore purple tights and leotard over bountiful curves. Tug's knees weakened.

"Doing that bee-dee together this afternoon was lots of fun, Tug. Let's keep at it! Now wish me luck! I've never portrayed a membrane before!"

Sukey planted a kiss on Tug's cheek, then bounced off.

Glowing brighter than any floodlight, Tug turned to his controls. He tilted the monitor that showed him the stage to a better viewing angle.

And then "Mystery Mother and Her Magic Membranes" was underway.

Under blood-red spotlights *Pudding* person Pristina Immaculata appeared, raised from below through a trap, an immense waterfall of artificial hair concealing her otherwise abundant naked charms, Eve-style. Pristina's magnificent voice, Tug had come to learn, made Yma Sumac's seem a primitive instrument.

Warbling up and down the scale, Pristina intoned with hieratic fervor, "In the beginning was the Steinhardt-Turok model, and the dimensions were eleven…"

A rear-projection screen at the back of the stage lit up with one of Franchot Galliard's B&W stag films, the infamous orgy scene from *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot,* involving Irish McCalla, Julie Newmar, Judy Holliday and Carole Landis.

Low-hanging clouds of dry-ice fog filled the stage. Tug's hands played over his controls, evoking an empyrean purple realm. A dozen women cartwheeled across the boards. The imperturbable South-Pacifican Tatang wheeled out on a unicycle, barechested and juggling three machetes.

"I shift among loop gravity, vacuum fluctuations, and supergravity forever!"

After that, things got weird.

Tug was so busy at his boards that he paid little heed to the audience reaction, insofar as it even penetrated his remove. Retrospectively, he recalled hearing clapping, some catcalls, whistles and shouts of approval. All good reactions.

But then, at the start of the second hour, the riot began.

What triggered it seemed inconsequential to Tug: some bit of abstruse physics jargon, recited and then pantomimed by a bevy of dancers wearing fractal-patterned tights. But the combined assertion of their words and actions outraged Lee Smolin and his clan. No doubt Oswaldo Vasterling had penned the speech with just this result in mind.

On his monitor, Tug saw the performance come to a confused halt. He abandoned his station and raced out front.

The staff of the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics had jumped to their feet and were shaking their fists at the stage, hollering insults.

Others in the audience told the dissenters to shut up and sit down. This enraged the unruly scientists further. Some bumrushed the stage, while others engaged in fisticuffs with the shushers. Gee, those guys could sure punch surprisingly hard for a bunch of electron-pushers.

The brawl spiralled outward from the principled nucleus, but without rhyme or reason. Soon the whole auditorium was churning with fighters and flighters.

Turk Vanson rushed onstage followed by his stalwart ocarina players. "We've got a fever, and my prescription is—more ocarina! Blow, guys, blow!"

The musicians launched into "Simple Gifts," practically the nation's second anthem ever since the tenure of Shaker Vice-President Thomas McCarthy during President Webster's second term. But the revered music had no effect.

Someone uncorked a fire extinguisher or three, and Tug caught a blast of foam in the face.

Tug cleared his vision just in time to dodge a flying bottle that clipped Vanson's head and sent him reeling, the projectile then tearing through the movie screen and passing right through the image of Bunny Yeager's split beaver.

A woman collided with Tug and they both went smashing down. Sukey? No? Where was she? Was she okay…?

Tatang rode over Tug's legs with his unicycle, causing him to grunt in pain and to forget anything else.

Sirens obtruded over the screams….

At the adamant urging of Ozzie, Franchot Galliard reluctantly posted bail for all the *Tom Pudding* arrestees the next morning.

Tug met Sukey outside the police station. She had sheltered on a catwalk during the worst of the fracas, dropping sandbags on rogue quantum theoreticians.

Back on the barge, Tug took a shower, then went to one of the galleys to rustle up some breakfast.

A copy of that morning's *Whig-Chronicle* lay on the table. The main headline, natch, concerned the debacle at the Vawter.

But buried inside the paper lurked an even more intriguing lede:

"Authorities report a break-in last night at the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics…."

10.

American Splendor

Tug and Sukey worked on their bee-dee throughout December. Projected as an anthology of several tales, some just a page, some many pages, the nascent book chronicled a bare handful of anecdotes from Tug's colorful years in Carrollboro. Events and characters came welling up from memory in a prodigious rush, producing laughter and incredulous head-shaking from his collaborator. He knew he had enough material for years of such books. And things always went on happening to him, too.

"You've led quite a life, Tug."

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess I have."

Tug had never been happier, or felt more creative. He blessed the day miserable bastard Narcisse Godbout had kicked him out of his comfortable rut, the day Pete had pointed him toward the *Tom Pudding*, the night alluring Pellenera had approached him, and the day he had impulsively snatched Sukey's sketchpad.

The cartooning team paused in their intense work only long enough to celebrate the birthday of Roger Williams on December 21st, along with the rest of the nation. Watching the traditional televised parades with Sukey, with their cheesy floats celebrating what had come to be known and worshipped as the Williams Creed, in all its archaically glorious phrasing —"No red man to be kept from our hearths and bedchambers; no black man to be imported to these shores against his will; no gods above the minds and hearts of mankind"—Tug experienced a simple national pride he had not felt in many years.

During these weeks, Tug and the rest of the barge's crazyquilt crew braced themselves for some new manifestation of Oswaldo Vasterling's brane-buster. The day after the catastrophic chautauqua, Ozzie had radiated a certain smug self-satisfaction at odds with his usual semblance of lordly indifference. Whatever he had purloined from the PITP must have promised immediate success. He immured himself in his lab, and the power levels aboard the craft wavered erratically, as evidenced by flickering brownouts from time to time, accompanied by noises and stinks.

But there had ensued no visible breakthroughs, no spontaneous generation of a second Pellenera, for instance, and Ozzie, when he finally showed himself to his followers, radiated a stony sense of humiliation and defeat.

By the end of January, Tug and Sukey had something they felt worthy of submission to a publisher. Tug found the contact info for an editor at Drawn & Quarterly, an imprint of the global Harmsworth Publishing empire. After querying, he received permission to submit, and off the package went, Sukey's powerful black and white art deliberately left uncolored.

Nothing to do but wait, now.

Deep into the bowels of one February night, Tug was awakened by distant music from beyond the spheres. Blanket wrapped haphazardly around himself, he stumbled up onto the frosted deck, finding himself surprisingly alone, as if the rest of the ship had been ensorcelled into fairytale somnolence.

Moonlight silvered the whole world. Pellenera—piping, argent eidolon—loomed atop the bank of the feeder canal. Tug shivered. Did she herald the arrival of a new recruit? Where was the guy?

But no newcomer emerged from among the winter-bare branches. Pellenera seemed intent merely on bleeding out her heart through the ocarina, as if seeking to convey an urgent message to someone.

Tug's mind drowned in the music. He seemed to be seeing the world through Pellenera's eyes, gazing down at himself on the deck. Was *she* tapping *his* optic nerves, seeing herself on the shore? That music—

Tug had a sudden vision of the Nubian woman, dancing naked save for—

—a skirt fashioned of bananas?

The music stopped. Pellenera vanished.

What the hell had all *that* been about?

An o-mail response from Drawn & Quarterly came in March, just as spring arrived.

Tug rushed back to the *Tom Pudding* with an o-café printout of the message.

Sukey Damariscotta was playing a videogame with Janey Vogelsang when Tug tracked her down: *Spores of Myst*. He hustled her away from Janey, to a quiet corner, then bade her read the printout.

"Oh, Tug, this is wonderful! We've done it!"

"I can't believe it!"

"Me neither!"

Tug grabbed Sukey, hugged her close, kissed her passionately and wildly lips to lips.

Hands on Tug's chest, Sukey pushed back, broke his embrace.

"What are you doing?"

"Sukey, I— You've gotta know by now—"

"Know what?" Her face registered distaste, as if she had been handed a slimy slug. "Oh, no, Tug, you can't imagine us hooking up, can you? I like you, sure, a lot. I respect your talent. But you're way too old…."

Time must've crept along somehow in its monotonous, purposeless, sempiternal fashion, although Tug couldn't have testified to that reality. All he knew was that in some manner he had crossed blocks of Carrollboro to stand outside The Wyandot. His old residence of thirty years' habitation

was garlanded with scaffolding, its plastic-membraned windows so many blank, unseeing eyes, unbreachable passages to a vanished era, a lost youth.

In the end, he returned to the *Tom Pudding*.

What choice did he have in this fallen, inhospitable world?

Sukey acted friendly toward him, even somewhat intimate. But Tug knew that they would never relate the same way again, and that their collaboration was over, whatever the fate of their one and only book.

* * * *

The voice of Ozzie Vasterling, when broadcast through the intercom system of the *Tom Pudding*—a system no one prior to this moment had even suspected was still active—resembled that of the Vizier of Cockaigne in the 1939 film version of that classic, as rendered by the imperious Charles Coburn.

“Attention, attention! Everyone report to my lab—on the double!”

Some folks were missing, ashore on their individual business. But Ozzie’s lab soon filled up with two dozen souls, Tug among them.

Weeks ago, Tug might have been as excited as the others gathered here. But since Sukey’s rebuff, life had lost its savor. What miracle could restore that burnish? None….

But yet—

Pellenera stood before the brane-buster, looking as out-of-place as a black panther in a taxi. Imagine a continent full of such creatures! Ozzie sat behind the keys of his harmonium. The brane-buster hummed and sparkled.

Ozzie could hardly speak. “Vibrations! It’s all the way the invisible strings vibrate! I only had to pay attention to her! Watch!”

He nodded to the Nubian, and she began to play her ocarina, as Ozzie pumped the harmonium attachment.

In the cabinet of the brane-buster, what could only be paradoxically described as a coruscating static vortex blossomed. Gasps from the watchers—even from sulky Tug.

With a joyous primal yawp, Pellenera hurled herself into the cabinet, still playing, and was no more.

The vortex lapsed into non-being as well.

Someone asked, “Is that the end?”

“Ha! Do you think I’m an idiot! I recorded every last note!”

Pellenera’s looped song started up again, and the vortex resumed.

Everyone waited.

Time stretched like the silent heist scene in Hitchcock’s *Rififi*.

Pellenera popped out of the cabinet, carrying something concealed in the crook of her arm, but naked as water herself.

Even from the edge of the crowd, Tug noticed that her naked back was inexplicably criss-crossed with a latticework of long antique gnarly scars, and he winced.

Revealed, her burden was one perfect golden Cavendish banana.

She smiled, and took several steps forward, the spectators parting before her like grasses beneath a breeze, until she came face to face with Tug.

And she handed the banana to him.

FEMAVILLE 29

La Palma is a tiny mote in the Canary Islands, a mote that had certainly never intruded into my awareness before one fateful day. On La Palma, five hundred billion tons of rock in the form of an unstable coastal plateau awaited a nudge, which they received when the Cumbre Vieja volcano erupted. Into the sea a good portion of the plateau plunged, a frightful hammer of the gods.

The peeling off of the face of the island was a smaller magnitude event than had been feared; but it was a larger magnitude event than anyone was prepared for.

The resulting tsunami raced across the Atlantic.

My city had gotten just twelve hours warning. The surreal chaos of the partial evacuation was like living through the most vivid nightmare or disaster film imaginable. Still, the efforts of the authorities and volunteers and good samaritans ensured that hundreds of thousands of people escaped with their lives.

Leaving other hundreds of thousands to face the wave.

Their only recourse was to find the tallest, strongest buildings and huddle.

I was on the seventh floor of an insurance company when the wave arrived. Posters in the reception area informed me that I was in good hands. I had a view of the harbor, half a mile away.

The tsunami looked like a liquid mountain mounted on a rocket sled.

When the wave hit, the building shuddered and bellowed like a steer in an abbatoir euthanized with a nail-gun. Every window popped out of its frame, and spray lashed even my level.

But the real fight for survival had not yet begun.

The next several days were a sleepless blur of crawling from the wreckage and helping others do likewise.

But not everyone was on the same side. Looters arose like some old biological paradigm of spontaneous generation from the muck.

Their presence demanded mine on the front lines.

I was a cop.

I had arrested several bad guys without any need for excessive force. But then came a shootout at a jewelry store where the display cases were

incongrously draped with drying kelp. I ended up taking the perps down okay. But the firefight left my weary brain and trembling gut hypersensitive to any threat.

Some indeterminate time afterwards—marked by a succession of candy-bar meals, digging under the floodlights powered by chuffing generators, and endless slogging through slimed streets—I was working my way through the upper floors of an apartment complex, looking for survivors. I shut off my flashlight when I saw a glow around a corner. Someone stepped between me and the light source, casting the shadow of a man with a gun. I yelled, “Police! Drop it!”, then crouched and dashed toward the gunman. The figure stepped forward, still holding the weapon, and I fired.

The boy was twelve, his weapon a water pistol.

His mother trailed him by a few feet—not far enough to escape getting splattered with her son’s blood.

Later I learned neither of them spoke a word of English.

One minute I was cradling the boy, and the next I was lying on a cot in a field hospital. Three days had gotten lost somewhere. Three days in which the whole world had learned of my mistake.

They let me get up the next day, ostensibly healthy and sane enough, even though my pistol hand, my left, still exhibited a bad tremor. I tried to report to the police command, but found that I had earned a temporary medical discharge. Any legal fallout from my actions awaited an end to the crisis.

I tried being a civilian volunteer for another day or two amidst the ruins, but my heart wasn’t in it. So I took the offer of evacuation to Femaville 29.

* * * *

The first week after the disaster actually manifested aspects of an odd, enforced vacation. Or rather, the atmosphere often felt more like an open-ended New Year’s Eve, the portal to some as-yet undefined millennium where all our good resolutions would come to pass. Once we victims emerged from the shock of losing everything we owned, including our shared identity as citizens of a large East Coast city, my fellow refugees and I began to exhibit a near-manic optimism in the face of the massive slate-cleaning.

The uplift was not to last. But while it preveailed, it was as if some secret imperative in the depths of our souls—a wish to be unburdened of all our

draggy pasts—had been fulfilled by cosmic fiat, without our having to lift a finger.

We had been given a chance to start all over, remake our lives afresh, and we were, for the most part, eager to grasp the offered personal remodeling.

Everyone in the swiftly erected encampment of a thousand men, women and children was healthy. The truly injured had all been airlifted to hospitals around the state and nation. Families had been reunited, even down to pets. The tents we were inhabiting were spacious, weather-tight and wired for electricity and entertainment. Meals were plentiful, albeit uninspired, served promptly in three shifts, thrice daily, in a large communal pavilion.

True, the lavatories and showers were also communal, and the lack of privacy grated a bit right from the start. Trudging through the chilly dark in the middle of the night to take a leak held limited appeal, even when you pretended you were camping. And winter, with its more challenging conditions, loomed only a few months away. Moreover, enforced idleness chafed those of us who were used to steady work. Lack of proper schooling for the scores of kids in the camp worried many parents.

But taken all in all, the atmosphere at the camp—christened with no more imaginative bureaucratic name than Femaville Number 29—was suffused with potential that first week.

My own interview with the FEMA intake authorities in the first days of the relocation was typical.

The late September sunlight warmed the interview tent so much that the canvas sides had been rolled up to admit fresh air scented with faint, not unpleasant maritime odors of decay. Even though Femaville 29 was located far inland—or what used to be far inland before the tsunami—the wrack left behind by the disaster lay not many miles away.

For a moment, I pictured exotic fish swimming through the streets and subways of my old city, weaving their paths among cars, couches and corpses. The imagery unsettled me, and I tried to focus on the more hopeful present.

The long tent hosted ranks of paired folding chairs, each chair facing its mate. The FEMA workers, armed with laptop computers, occupied one seat of each pair, while an interviewee sat in the other. The subdued mass interrogation and the clicking of keys raised a surprisingly dense net of sound that overlaid the noises from outside the tent: children roistering,

adults gossiping, birds chattering. Outside the tent, multiple lines of refugees stretched away, awaiting their turns.

The official seated across from me was a pretty young African-American woman whose name-badge proclaimed her HANNAH LAWES. Unfortunately, she reminded me of my ex-wife, Calley, hard in the same places Calley was hard. I tried to suppress an immediate dislike of her. As soon as I sat down, Hannah Lawes expressed rote sympathy for my plight, a commiseration worn featureless by its hundredth repetition. Then she got down to business.

"Name?"

"Parrish Hedges."

"Any relatives in the disaster zone?"

"No, ma'am."

"What was your job back in the city?"

I felt my face heat up. But I had no choice, except to answer truthfully.

"I was a police officer, ma'am."

That answer gave Hannah Lawes pause. Finally, she asked in an accusatory fashion, "Shouldn't you still be on duty then? Helping with security in the ruins?"

My left hand started to quiver a bit, but I suppressed it so that I didn't think she noticed.

"Medical exemption, ma'am."

Hannah Lawes frowned slightly and said, "I hope you don't mind if I take a moment to confirm that, Mr. Hedges."

Her slim, manicured fingers danced over her keyboard, dragging my data down the airwaves. I studied the plywood floor of the tent while she read my file.

When I looked up, her face had gone disdainful.

"This explains much, Mr. Hedges."

"Can we move on, please?"

As if I ever could.

Hannah Lawes resumed her programmed spiel. "All right, let's talk about your options now…."

For the next few minutes, she outlined the various programs and handouts and incentives that the government and private charities and NGO's had lined up for the victims of the disaster. Somehow, none of the choices really

matched my dreams and expectations engendered by the all-consuming catastrophe. All of them involved relocating to some other part of the country, leaving behind the shattered chaos of the East Coast. And that was something I just wasn't ready for yet, inevitable as such a move was.

And besides, choosing any one particular path would have meant foregoing all the others. Leaving this indeterminate interzone of infinite possibility would lock me into a new life that might be better than my old one, but would still be fixed, crystallized, frozen into place.

"Do I have to decide right now?"

"No, no, of course not."

I stood up to go, and Hannah Lawes added, "But you realize, naturally, that this camp was never intended as a long-term residence. It's only transitional, and will be closed down at some point not too far in the future."

"Yeah, sure," I said. "We're all just passing through. I get it."

I left then and made way for the next person waiting in line.

* * * *

The tents of Femaville 29 were arranged along five main dirt avenues, each as wide as a city boulevard. Expressing the same ingenuity that had dubbed our whole encampment, the avenues were labeled A, B, C, D and E. Every three tents, a numbered cross-street occurred. The tents of one avenue backed up against the tents of the adjacent avenue, so that a cross-block was two tents wide. The land where Femaville 29 was pitched was flat and treeless and covered in newly mowed weeds and grasses. Beyond the borders of our village stretched a mix of forest, scrubby fields and swamp, eventually giving way to rolling hills. The nearest real town was about ten miles away, and there was no regular transportation there other than by foot.

As I walked up Avenue D toward my tent (D-30), I encountered dozens of my fellow refugees who were finished with the intake process. Only two days had passed since the majority of us had been ferried here in commandeered school buses. People—the adults, anyhow—were still busy exchanging their stories—thrilling, horrific or mundane—about how they had escaped the tsunami or dealt with the aftermath.

I didn’t have any interest in repeating my tale, so I didn’t join in any such conversations.

As for the children, they seemed mostly to have flexibly put behind them all the trauma they must have witnessed. Reveling in their present freedom from boring routine, they raced up and down the avenues in squealing packs.

Already, the seasonally withered grass of the avenues was becoming dusty ruts. Just days old, this temporary village, I could feel, was already beginning to lose its freshness and ambiance of novelty.

Under the unseasonably warm sun, I began to sweat. A cold beer would have tasted good right now. But the rules of Femaville 29 prohibited alcohol.

I reached my tent and went inside.

My randomly assigned roommate lay on his bunk. Given how the disaster had shattered and stirred the neighborhoods of the city, it was amazing that I actually knew the fellow from before. I had encountered no one else yet in the camp who was familiar to me. And out of all my old friends and acquaintances and co-workers, Ethan Duplessix would have been my last choice to be reunited with.

Ethan was a fat, bristled slob with a long criminal record of petty theft, fraud and advanced mopery. His personal grooming habits were so atrocious that he had emerged from the disaster more or less in the same condition he entered it, unlike the rest of the survivors who had gone from well-groomed to uncommonly bedraggled and smelly.

Ethan and I had crossed paths often, and I had locked him up more times than I could count. (When the tsunami sturck, he had been amazingly free of outstanding charges.) But the new circumstances of our lives, including Ethan’s knowledge of how I had “retired” from the force, placed us now on a different footing.

“Hey, Hedges, how’d it go? They got you a new job yet? Maybe security guard at a kindergarten!”

I didn’t bother replying, but just flopped down on my bunk. Ethan chuckled meanly at his own paltry wit for a while, but when I didn’t respond, he eventually fell silent, his attentions taken up by a tattered copy of *Maxim*.

I closed my eyes and drowsed for a while, until I got hungry. Then I got up and went to the refectory.

That day they were serving hamburgers and fries for the third day in a row. Mickey Dee's seemed to have gotten a lock on the contract to supply the camp. I took mine to an empty table. Head bowed, halfway through my meal, I sensed someone standing beside me.

The woman's curly black hair descended to her shoulders in a tumbled mass. Her face resembled a cameo in its alabaster fineness.

"Mind if I sit here?" she said.

"Sure. I mean, go for it."

The simple but primordial movements of her legs swinging over the bench seat and her ass settling down awakened emotions in me that had been absent since Calley's abrupt leave-taking.

"Nia Horsley. Used to live over on Garden Parkway."

"Nice district."

Nia snorted, a surprisingly enjoyable sound. "Yeah, once."

"I never got over there much. Worked in East Grove. Had an apartment on Oakeshott."

"And what would the name on your doorbell have been?"

"Oh, sorry. Parrish Hedges."

"Pleased to meet you, Parrish."

We shook hands. Hers was small but strong, enshelled in mine like a pearl.

For the next two hours, through two more shifts of diners coming and going, we talked, exchanging condensed life stories, right up to the day of disaster and down to our arrival at Femaville 29. Maybe the accounts were edited for maximum appeal, but I intuitively felt she and I were being honest nonetheless. When the refectory workers finally shooed us out in order to clean up for supper, I felt as if I had known Nia for two weeks, two months, two years—

She must have felt the same. As we strolled away down Avenue B, she held my hand.

"I don't have a roomie in my tent."

"Oh?"

"It's just me and my daughter. Luck of the draw, I guess."

"I like kids. Never had any, but I like 'em."

“Her name’s Izzy. Short for Isabel. You’ll get to meet her. But maybe not just yet.”

“How come?”

“She’s made a lot of new friends. They stay out all day, playing on the edge of the camp. Some kind of weird new game they invented.”

“We could go check up on her, and I could say hello.”

Nia squeezed my hand. “Maybe not right this minute.”

* * * *

I got to meet Izzy the day after Nia and I slept together. I suppose I could’ve hung around till Izzy came home for supper, but the intimacy with Nia, after such a desert of personal isolation, left me feeling a little disoriented and pressured. So I made a polite excuse for my departure, which Nia accepted with good grace, and arranged to meet mother and daughter for breakfast.

Izzy bounced into the refectory ahead of her mother. She was seven or eight, long-limbed and fair-haired in contrast to her mother’s compact, raven-haired paleness, but sharing Nia’s high-cheeked bone structure. I conjectured backward to a gangly blond father.

The little girl zeroed in on me somehow out of the whole busy dining hall, racing up to where I sat, only to slam on the brakes with alarming precipitousness.

“You’re Mr. Hedges!” she informed me and the world.

“Yes, I am. And you’re Izzy.”

I was ready to shake her hand in a formal adult manner. But then she exclaimed, “You made my Mom all smiley!” and launched herself into my awkward embrace.

Before I could really respond, she was gone, heading for the self-service cereal line.

I looked at Nia, who was grinning.

“And this,” I asked, “is her baseline?”

“Precisely. When she’s really excited—”

“I’ll wear one of those padded suits we used for training the K-9 squad.”

Nia’s expression altered to one of seriousness and sympathy, and I instantly knew what was coming. I cringed inside, if not where it showed. She sat down next to me and put a hand on my arm.

“Parrish, I admit I did a little googling on you after we split yesterday, over at the online tent. I know about why you aren’t a cop anymore. And I just want to say that—”

Before she could finish, Izzy materialized out of nowhere, bearing a tray holding two bowls of technicolor puffs swimming in chocolate milk, and slipped herself between us slick as a greased eel.

“They’re almost out of food! You better hurry!” With a plastic knife, Izzy began slicing a peeled banana into chunks thick as oreos that plopped with alarming splashes into her bowls.

I stood up gratefully. “I’ll get us something, Nia. Eggs and bacon and toast okay?”

She gave me a look which said that she could wait to talk. “Sure.”

During breakfast, Nia and I mostly listened to Izzy’s chatter.

“—and then Vonique’s all like, ‘But the way I remember it is the towers were next to the harbor, not near the zoo.’ And Eddie goes, ‘Na-huh, they were right where the park started.’ And they couldn’t agree and they were gonna start a fight, until I figured out that they were talking about two differents places! Vonique meant the Goblin Towers, and Eddie meant the Towers of Bone! So I straightened them out, and now the map of Djamala is like almost half done!”

“That’s wonderful, honey.”

“It’s a real skill, being a peacemaker like that.”

Izzy cocked her head and regarded me quizzically. “But that’s just what I’ve always been forever.”

In the next instant she was up and kissing her mother, then out the hall and raising puffs of dust as she ran toward where I could see other kids seemingly waiting for her.

Nia and I spent the morning wandering around the camp, talking about anything and everything—except my ancient, recent disgrace. We watched a pickup soccer game for an hour or so, the players expending the bottled energy that would have gone to work and home before the disaster, then ended up back at her tent around three.

Today was as warm as yesterday, and we raised a pretty good sweat. Nia dropped off to sleep right after, but I couldn’t.

Eleven days after the flood, and it was all I could dream about.

* * * *

Ethan was really starting to get on my nerves. He had seen me hanging out with Nia and Izzy, and used the new knowledge to taunt me.

“What’s up with you and the little girl, Hedges? Thinking of keeping your hand in with some target practice?”

I stood quivering over his bunk before I even realized I had moved. My fists were bunched at my hips, ready to strike. But both Ethan and I knew I wouldn’t.

The penalty for fighting at any of the Femavilles was instant expulsion, and an end to government charity. I couldn’t risk losing Nia now that I had found her. Even if we managed to stay in touch while apart, who was to say that the fluid milieu of the post-disaster environment would not conspire to supplant our relationship with another.

So I stalked out and went to see Hannah Lawes.

One complex of tents hosted the bureaucrats. Lawes sat at a folding table with her omnipresent laptop. Hooked to a printer, the machine was churning out travel vouchers branded with official glyphs of authenticity.

“Mr. Hedges. What can I do for you? Have you decided to take up one of the host offerings? There’s a farming community in Nebraska—”

I shook my head in the negative. Trying to imagine myself relocated to the prairies was so disorienting that I almost forgot why I had come here.

Hannah Lawes seemed disappointed by my refusal of her proposal, but realistic about the odds that I would’ve accepted. “I can’t say I’m surprised. Not many people are leaping at what I can offer. I’ve only gotten three takers so far. And I can’t figure out why. They’re all generous, sensible berths.”

“Yeah, sure. That’s the problem.”

“What do you mean?”

“No one wants ‘sensible’ after what they’ve been through. We all want to be reborn as phoenixes—not drayhorses. That’s all that would justify our sufferings.”

Hannah Lawes said nothing for a moment, and only the minor whine of the printer filigreed the bubble of silence around us. When she spoke, her voice was utterly neutral.

“You could die here before you achieve that dream, Mr. Hedges. Now, how can I help you, if not with a permanent relocation?”

“If I arrange different living quarters with the consent of everyone involved, is there any regulation stopping me from switching tents?”

“No, not at all.”

“Good. I’ll be back.”

I tracked down Nia and found her using a piece of exercise equipment donated by a local gym. She hopped off and hugged me.

“Have to do something about my weight. I’m not used to all this lolling around.”

Nia had been a waitress back in the city, physically active eight or more hours daily. My own routines, at least since Calley left me, had involved more couch-potato time than mountain climbing, and the sloth of camp life sat easier on me.

We hugged, her body sweaty in my arms, and I explained my problem.

“I realize we haven’t known each other very long, Nia, but do you think __”

“I’d like it if you moved in with Izzy and me, Parrish. One thing the tsunami taught us—life’s too short to dither. And I’d feel safer.”

“No one’s been bothering you, have they?”

“No, but there’s just too many weird noises out here in the country. Every time a branch creaks, I think someone’s climbing my steps.”

I hugged her again, harder, in wordless thanks.

We both went back to Lawes and arranged the new tent assignments.

When I went to collect my few possessions, Ethan sneered at me.

“Knew you’d run, Hedges. Without your badge, you’re nothing.”

As I left, I wondered what I had been even with my badge.

* * * *

Living with Nia and Izzy, I naturally became more involved in the young girl’s activities.

And that’s when I learned about Djamala.

By the end of the second week in Femaville 29, the atmosphere had begun to sour. The false exuberance engendered by sheer survival amidst so much death—and the accompanying sense of newly opened horizons—had dissipated. In place of these emotions came anomie, irritability, anger, despair, and a host of other negative feelings. The immutable, unchanging confines of the unfenced camp assumed the proportions of a stalag. The

food, objectively unchanged in quality or quantity, met with disgust, simply because we had no control over its creation. The shared privies assumed a stink no amount of bleach could dispel.

Mere conversation and gossip had paled, replaced with disproportionate arguments over inconsequentials. Sports gave way to various games of chance, played with the odd pair of dice or deck of cards, with bets denominated in sex or clothing or desserts.

One or two serious fights resulted in the promised expulsions, and, chastened but surly, combatants restrained themselves to shoving matches and catcalls.

A few refugees, eager for stimulation and a sense of normality, made the long trek into town—and found themselves returned courtesy of local police cars.

The bureaucrats managing the camp—Hannah Lawes and her peers—were not immune to the shifting psychic tenor of Femaville 29. From models of optimism and can-do effectiveness, the officials began to slide into terse minimalist responses.

“I don’t know what more we can do,” Hannah Lawes told me. “If our best efforts to reintegrate everyone as functioning and productive members of society are not appreciated, then—”

She left the consequences unstated, merely shaking her head ruefully at our ingratitude and sloth.

The one exception to this general malaise were the children.

Out of a thousand people in Femaville 29, approximately two hundred were children younger than twelve. Although sometimes their numbers seemed larger, as they raced through the camp’s streets and avenues in boisterous packs. Seemingly unaffected by the unease and dissatisfaction exhibited by their guardians and parents, the kids continued to enjoy their pastoral interlude. School, curfews, piano lessons—all shed in a return to a prelapsarian existence as hunter-gatherers of the twenty-first century.

When they weren’t involved in traditional games, they massed on the outskirts of the camp for an utterly novel undertaking.

There, I discovered, they were building a new city to replace the one they had lost.

Or, perhaps, simply mapping one that already existed.

And Izzy Horsley, I soon learned (with actually very little surprise), was one of the prime movers of this jovial, juvenile enterprise.

With no tools other than their feet and hands, the children had cleared a space almost as big as a football field of all vegetation, leaving behind a dusty canvas on which to construct their representation of an imaginary city.

Three weeks into its construction, the map-cum-model had assumed impressive dimensions, despite the rudimentary nature of its materials.

I came for the first time to the site one afternoon when I grew tired of continuously keeping Nia company in the exercise tent. Her own angst about ensuring the best future for herself and loved ones had manifested as an obsession with “keeping fit” that I couldn’t force myself to share. With my mind drifting, a sudden curiosity about where Izzy was spending so much of her time stole over me, and I ambled over to investigate.

Past the ultimate tents, I came upon what could have been a construction site reimagined for the underage cast of *Sesame Street*.

The youngest children were busy assembling stockpiles of stones and twigs and leaves. The stones were quarried from the immediate vicinity, emerging still wet with loam, while sticks and leaves came from a nearby copse in long disorderly caravans.

Older children were engaged in two different kinds of tasks. One chore involved using long pointed sticks to gouge lines in the dirt: lines that plainly marked streets, natural features and the outlines of buildings. The second set of workers was elaborating these outlines with the organic materials from the stockpiles. The map was mostly flat, but occasionally a structure, teepee or cairn, rose up a few inches.

The last, smallest subset of workers were the architects: the designers, engineers, imagineers of the city. They stood off to one side, consulting, arguing, issuing orders, and sometimes venturing right into the map to correct the placement of lines or ornamentation.

Izzy was one of these elite.

Deep in discussion with a cornrowed black girl and a pudgy white boy wearing smudged glasses, Izzy failed to note my approach, and so I was able to overhear their talk. Izzy was holding forth at the moment.

“—Sprankle Hall covers two whole blocks, not just one! C’mon, you gotta remember that! Remember when we went there for a concert, and

after we wanted to go around back to the door where the musicians were coming out, and how long it took us to get there?”

The black girl frowned, then said, “Yeah, right, we had to walk like forever. But if Sprankle Hall goes from Cleverly Street all the way to Khush Lane, then how does Pinemarten Avenue run without a break?”

The fat boy spoke with assurance. “It’s the Redondo Tunnel. Goes under Sprankle Hall.”

Izzy and the black girl grinned broadly. “Of course! I remember when that was built!”

I must have made some noise then, for the children finally noticed me. Izzy rushed over and gave me a quick embrace.

“Hey, Parrish! What’re you doing here?”

“I came to see what was keeping you guys so busy. What’s going on here?”

Izzy’s voice expressed no adult embarrassment, doubt, irony or blasé dismissal of a temporary time-killing project. “We’re building a city! Djamala! It’s someplace wonderful!”

The black girl nodded solemnly. I recalled the name Vonique from Izzy’s earlier conversation, and the name seemed suddenly inextricably linked to this child.

“Well,” said Vonique, “it *will* be wonderful, once we finish it. But right now it’s still a *mess*.”

“This city—Djamala? How did it come to be? Who invented it?”

“Nobody *invented* it!” Izzy exclaimed. “It’s always been there. We just couldn’t remember it until the wave.”

The boy—Eddie?—said, “That’s right, sir. The tsunami made it rise up.”

“Rise up? Out of the waters, like Atlantis? A new continent?”

Eddie pushed his glasses further up his nose. “Not out of the ocean. Out of our minds.”

My expression must have betrayed disbelief. Izzy grabbed one of my hands with both of hers. “Parrish, please! This is really important for everyone. You gotta believe in Djamala! Really!”

“Well, I don’t know if I *can* believe in it the same way you kids can. But what if I promise just not to *dis*believe yet? Would that be good enough?”

Vonique puffed air past her lips in a semi-contemptuous manner. “Huh! I suppose that’s as good as we’re gonna get from anyone, until we can show

them something they can’t ignore.”

Izzy gazed up at me with imploring eyes. “Parrish? You’re not gonna let us down, are you?”

What could I say? “No, no, of course not. If I can watch and learn, maybe I can start to understand.”

Izzy, Vonique and Eddie had to confer with several other pint-sized architects before they could grant me observer’s status, but eventually they did confer that honor on me.

So for the next several days I spent most of my time with the children as they constructed their imaginary metropolis.

At first, I was convinced that the whole process was merely some over-elaborated coping strategy for dealing with the disaster that had upended their young lives.

But at the end of a week, I was not so certain.

So long as I did not get in the way of construction, I was allowed to venture down the outlined HO-scale streets, given a tour of the city’s extensive features and history by whatever young engineer was least in demand at the moment. The story of Djamala’s ancient founding, its history and contemporary life, struck me as remarkably coherent and consistent at the time, although I did not pay as much attention as I should have to the information. I theorized then that the children were merely re-sorting a thousand borrowed bits and pieces from televsion, films and video games. Now, I can barely recall a few salient details. The Crypt of the Thousand Martyrs, the Bluepoint Aerial Tramway, Penton Park, Winkelreed Slough, Mid-winter Festival, the Squid Club— These proper names, delivered in the pure, piping voices of Izzy and her peers, are all that remain to me.

I wished I could get an aerial perspective on the diagram of Djamala. It seemed impossibly refined and balanced to have been plotted out solely from a ground-level perspective. Like the South American drawings at Nazca, its complex lineaments seemed to demand a superior view from some impossible, more-than-mortal vantage point.

After a week spent observing the children—a week during which a light evening rain shower did much damage to Djamala, damage which the children industriously and cheerfully began repairing—a curious visual hallucination overtook me.

Late afternoon sunlight slanted across the map of Djamala as the children began to tidy up in preparation for quitting. Sitting on a borrowed folding chair, I watched their small forms, dusted in gold, move along eccentric paths. My mind commenced to drift amidst wordless regions. The burden of my own body seemed to fall away.

At that moment, the city of Djamala began to assume a ghostly reality, translucent buildings rearing skyward. Ghostly minarets, stadia, pylons—

I jumped up, heart thumping to escape my chest, frightened to my core.

Memory of a rubbish-filled, clammy, partially illuminated hallway, and the shadow of a gunman, pierced me.

My senses had betrayed me fatally once before. How could I ever fully trust them again?

Djamala vanished then, and I was relieved.

* * * *

A herd of government-drafted school buses materialized one Thursday on the outskirts of Femaville 29, on the opposite side of the camp from Djamala, squatting like empty-eyed yellow elephants, and I knew that the end of the encampment was imminent. But exactly how soon would we be expelled to more permanent quarters not of our choosing? I went to see Hannah Lawes.

I tracked down the social worker in the kitchen of the camp. She was efficiently taking inventory of cases of canned goods.

“Ms. Lawes, can I talk to you?”

A small hard smile quirked one corner of her lips. “Mr. Hedges. Have you had a sudden revelation about your future?”

“Yes, in a way. Those buses—”

“Are not scheduled for immediate use. FEMA believes in proper advance staging of resources.”

“But when—”

“Who can say? I assure you that I don’t personally make such command decisions. But I will pass along any new directives as soon as I am permitted.”

Unsatisfied, I left her tallying creamed corn and green beans.

Everyone in the camp, of course, had seen the buses, and speculation about the fate of Femaville 29 was rampant. Were we to be dispersed to

public housing in various host cities? Was the camp to be merged with others into a larger concentration of refugees for economy of scale? Maybe we'd all be put to work restoring our mortally wounded drowned city. Every possibility looked equally likely.

I expected Nia's anxiety to be keyed up by the threat of dissolution of our hard-won small share of stability, this island of improvised family life we had forged. But instead, she surprised me by expressing complete confidence in the future.

"I can't worry about what's coming, Parrish. We're together now, with a roof over our heads, and that's all that counts. Besides, just lately I've gotten a good feeling about the days ahead."

"Based on what?"

Nia shrugged with a smile. "Who knows?"

The children, however, Izzy included, were not quite as sanguine as Nia. The coming of the buses had goaded them to greater activity. No longer did they divide the day into periods of conventional playtime and construction of their city of dreams. Instead, they labored at the construction full-time.

The ant-like trains of bearers ferried vaster quantities of sticks and leaves, practically denuding the nearby copse. The grubbers-up of pebbles broke their nails uncomplainingly in the soil. The scribers of lines ploughed empty square footage into new districts like the most rapacious of suburban developers. The ornamentation crew thatched and laid mosaics furiously. And the elite squad overseeing all the activity wore themselves out like military strategists overseeing an invasion.

"What do we build today?"

"The docks at Kannuckaden."

"But we haven't even put down the Mocambo River yet!"

"Then do the river first! But we have to fill in the Great Northeastern Range before tomorrow!"

"What about Gopher Gulch?"

"That'll be next."

Befriending some kitchen help secured me access to surplus cartons of pre-packaged treats. I took to bringing the snacks to the hard-working children, and they seemed to appreciate it. Although truthfully, they spared little enough attention to me or any other adult, lost in their make-believe, laboring blank-eyed or with feverish intensity.

The increased activity naturally attracted the notice of the adults. Many heretofore-oblivious parents showed up at last to see what their kids were doing. The consensus was that such behavior, while a little weird, was generally harmless enough, and actually positive, insofar as it kept the children from boredom and any concomittant pestering of parents. After a few days of intermittent parental visits, the site was generally clear of adults once more.

One exception to this rule was Ethan Duplessix.

At first, I believed, he began hanging around Djamala solely because he saw me there. Peeved by how I had escaped his taunts, he looked for some new angle from which to attack me, relishing the helplessness of his old nemesis.

But as I continued to ignore the slobby criminal slacker, failing to give him any satisfaction, his frustrated focus turned naturally to what the children were actually doing. My lack of standing as any kind of legal guardian to anyone except, at even the widest stretch of the term, Izzy, meant that I could not prevent the children from talking to him.

They answered Ethan's questions respectfully and completely at first, and I could see interest building in his self-serving brain, as he rotated the facts this way and that, seeking some advantage for himself. But then the children grew tired of his gawking and cut him off.

"We have too much work to do. You've got to go now."

"Please, Mr. Duplessix, just leave us alone."

I watched Ethan's expression change from greedy curiosity to anger. He actually threatened the children.

"You damn kids! You need to share! Or else someone'll just take what you've got!"

I was surprised at the fervor of Ethan's interest in Djamala. Maybe something about the dream project had actually touched a decent, imaginative part of his soul. But whatever the case, his threats gave me a valid excuse to hustle him off.

"You can't keep me away, Hedges! I'll be back!"

Izzy stood by my side, watching Ethan's retreat.

"Don't worry about him," I said.

"I'm not worried, Parrish. Djamala can protect itself."

The sleeping arrangements in the tent Nia, Izzy and I shared involved a hanging blanket down the middle of the tent, to give both Izzy and us adults some privacy. Nia and I had pushed two cots together on our side and lashed them together to make a double bed. But even with a folded blanket atop the wooden bar down the middle of the makeshift bed, I woke up several times a night, as I instinctively tried to snuggle Nia and encountered the hard obstacle. Nia, smaller, slept fine on her side of the double cots.

The night after the incident with Ethan, I woke up as usual in the small hours of the morning. Something urged me to get up. I left the cot and stepped around the hanging barrier to check on Izzy.

Her cot was empty, only blankets holding a ghostly imprint of her small form.

I was just on the point of mounting a general alarm when she slipped back into the tent, clad in pajamas and dew-wet sneakers.

My presence startled her, but she quickly recovered, and smiled guiltlessly.

“Bathroom call?” I whispered.

Izzy never lied. “No. Just checking on Djamala. It’s safe now. Today we finished the Iron Grotto. Just in time.”

“That’s good. Back to sleep now.”

Ethan Duplessix had never missed a meal in his life. But the morning after Izzy’s nocturnal inspection of Djamala, he was nowhere to be seen at any of the three breakfast shifts. Likewise for lunch. When he failed to show at super, I went to D-30.

Ethan’s sparse possessions remained behind, but the man himself was not there. I reported his absence to Hannah Lawes.

“Please don’t concern yourself unnecessarily, Mr. Hedges. I’m sure Mr. Duplessix will turn up soon. He probably spent the night in intimate circumstances with someone.”

“Ethan? I didn’t realize the camp boasted any female trolls.”

“Now, now, Mr. Hedges, that’s most ungenerous of you.”

Ethan did not surface the next day, or the day after that, and was eventually marked a runaway.

The third week of October brought the dreaded announcement. Lulled by the gentle autumnal weather, the unvarying routines of the camp, and by the

lack of any foreshadowings, the citizens of Femaville 29 were completely unprepared for the impact.

A general order to assemble outside by the buses greeted every diner at breakfast. Shortly before noon, a thousand refugees, clad in their donated coats and sweaters and jackets, shuffled their feet on the field that doubled as parking lot, breath pluming in the October chill. The ranks of buses remained as before, save for one unwelcome difference.

The motors of the buses were all idling, drivers behind their steering wheels.

The bureaucrats had assembled on a small raised platform. I saw Hannah Lawes in the front, holding a loud-hailer. Her booming voice assailed us.

“It’s time now for your relocation. You’ve had a fair and lawful amount of time to choose your destination, but have failed to take advantage of this opportunity. Now your government has done so for you. Please board the buses in an orderly fashion. Your possessions will follow later.”

“Where are we going?” someone called out.

Imperious, Hannah Lawes answered, “You’ll find out when you arrive.”

Indignation and confusion bloomed in the crowd. A contradictory babble began to mount heavenward. Hannah Lawes said nothing more immediately. I assumed she was waiting for the chaotic reaction to burn itself out, leaving the refugees sheepishly ready to obey.

But she hadn’t countered on the children intervening.

A massed juvenile shriek brought silence in its wake. There was nothing wrong with the children gathered on the edges of the crowd, as evidenced by their nervous smiles. But their tactic had certainly succeeded in drawing everyone’s attention.

Izzy was up front of her peers, and she shouted now, her young voice proud and confident.

“Follow us! We’ve made a new home for everyone!”

The children turned as one and began trotting away toward Djamala.

For a frozen moment, none of the adults made a move. Then, a man and woman—Vonique’s parents—set out after the children.

Their departure catalyzed a mad general desperate rush, toward a great impossible unknown that could only be better than the certainty offered by FEMA.

Nia had been standing by my side, but she was swept away. I caught a last glimpse of her smiling, shining face as she looked back for a moment over her shoulder. Then the crowd carried her off.

I found myself hesitating. How could I face the inevitable crushing disappointment of the children, myself, and everyone else when their desperate hopes were met by a metropolis of sticks and stones and pebbles? Being there when it happened, seeing all the hurt, crestfallen faces at the instant they were forced to acknowledge defeat, would be sheer torture. Why not just wait here for their predestined return, when we could pretend the mass insanity had never happened, mount the buses and roll off, chastised and broken, to whatever average future was being offered to us?

Hannah Lawes had sidled up to me, loud-hailer held by her side.

“I’m glad to see at least one sensible person here, Mr. Hedges. Congratulations for being a realist.”

Her words, her barely concealed glee and schadenfreude, instantly flipped a switch inside me from off to on, and I sped after my fellow refugees.

Halfway through the encampment, I glanced up to see Djamala looming ahead.

The splendors I had seen in ghostly fashion weeks ago were now magnified and recomplicated across acres of space. A city woven of childish imagination stretched impossibly to the horizon and beyond, its towers and monuments sparkling in the sun.

I left the last tents behind me in time to see the final stragglers entering the streets of Djamala. I heard water splash from fountains, shoes tapping on shale sidewalks, laughter echoing down wide boulevards.

But at the same time, I could see only a memory of myself in a ruined building, gun in hand, confronting a shadow assassin.

Which was reality?

I faltered to a stop.

Djamala vanished in a blink.

And I fell insensible to the ground.

I awoke in the tent that served as the infirmary for Femaville 29. Hannah Lawes was stitting by my bedside.

“Feeling better, Mr. Hedges? You nearly disrupted the exodus.”

“What—what do you mean?”

“Your fellow refugees. They’ve all been bussed to their next station in life.”

I sat up on my cot. “What are you trying to tell me? Didn’t you see the city, Djamala? Didn’t you see it materialize where the children built it? Didn’t you see all the refugees flood in?”

Hannah Lawes’s cocoa skin drained of vitality as she sought to master what were evidently strong emotions in conflict.

“What I saw doesn’t matter, Mr. Hedges. It’s what the government has determined to have happened that matters. And the government has marked all your fellow refugees from Femaville 29 as settled elsewhere in the normal fashion. Case closed. Only you remain behind to be dealt with. Your fate is separate from theirs now. You certainly won’t be seeing any of your temporary neighbors again for some time—if ever.”

I recalled the spires and lakes, the pavilions and theaters of Djamala. I pictured Ethan Duplessix rattling the bars of the Iron Grotto. I was sure he’d reform, and be set free eventually. I pictured Nia and Izzy, swanning about in festive apartments, happy and safe, with Izzy enjoying the fruits of her labors.

And myself the lame child left behind by the Pied Piper.

“No,” I replied, “I don’t suppose I will see them again soon.”

Hannah Lawes smiled at my acceptance of her dictates, but only for a moment, until I spoke again.

“But then, you can never be sure.”

AUTHOR’S NOTE

Common wisdom has it that a beginning writer seeks to emulate his literary favorites. Only by so doing can he or she ultimately achieve a unique voice. While this observation is certainly, demonstrably true, it is also false, insofar as it seems to imply that there comes a point where a “mature” writer no longer has any models uppermost in his mind when starting a new story. Each writer is supposed to be a nonpareil, guided only his unexampled vision.

If so, then I am far from a “mature” writer. For I often choose to be inspired by the writers whose work I admire, deliberately modeling a story on what I perceive to be their style and virtues and concerns. (Heck, that’s what my entire collection titled Lost Pages is all about!)

Like an evangelical wearing a “What Would Jesus Do?” wristband, I don and remove similar invisible wristbands all the time. “What Would Pynchon Do?” “What Would Faulkner Do?” “What Would Heinlein Do?” And so on.

Anyway, aside from the obvious inspiration to be found in the Hurricane Katrina/New Orleans disaster, the impetus for this story stems from wanting to emulate or borrow the admirable mind of Lucius Shepard.

As I once titled a review of Lucius’s work, “The Shepard is my Lord!”

SHUTEYE FOR THE TIMEBROKER

Three AM in the middle of May, six bells in the midwatch, and Cedric Swann, timebroker, was just sitting down to nocturne at his favorite café, the Glialto. He had found an empty table toward the back, where he would be left alone to watch the game.

The game on which his whole future depended.

He took a rolled-up Palimpsest flatscreen from his pocket, snapped it open, and the baby freethinker within the screen, knowing Cedric's preferences, tuned to a live feed from Pac Bell Park. Shots of the stands showed that the brilliantly illuminated park was full, and that was good news, since Cedric had brokered the event. A timebroker was nothing if he couldn't deliver warm bodies. But the box score displayed in a corner of the screen held less happy tidings.

The Giants were losing 4-6 against Oakland, with only one more inning to go.

Cedric winced and crumpled, as if pitchforked from within. He had fifty thousand dollars riding on the Giants.

The bet had been a sure thing, intended to offset some of his debts from a recent string of gambling losses. But the fucking Giants had been forced to bench their best pitcher with injuries, just prior to the game. The lanky Afghani newbie had been moved up from the Kabul farm team to boost the fortunes of the San Francisco team after their disastrous '36 season, and he had indeed done so. But now his absence was killing Cedric. And the club's remaining players were stumbling around like a bunch of fucking sleepers!

The failure of his home team was most disappointing.

Especially since Cedric didn't have the fifty thousand dollars he had wagered.

A window opened in Cedric's Palimpsest, showing the facial of the Glialto's resident freethinker. As usual, the restaurant's freethinker wore the likeness of Jack Kerouac. On the occasion of the one-hundredth anniversary of Kerouac's birth, there had been a big Beat revival nationwide—but nowhere more fervently than in San Francisco—and the Glialto freethinker had adopted its avatar then, although the café's personality was decidedly less bohemian than old Jack.

“Happy six bells, Cedric. What’ll you have this hour?”

“Uh, I don’t know. Jesus, I’m not even hungry—”

“C’mon now, you know what your mom would say. ‘Skip caloric nocturne, risk metabolic downturn.’”

“Yeah, right, if my Mom was the fucking NIH or FDA. Oh, all right, then, make it something simple. Give me a plate of fish tacos. And an Anchor Steam.”

“Coming right up, Cedric.”

The little window closed just in time to afford Cedric a complete panoramic view of an A’s player slamming a homerun out of the park.

“Christ! I am so drowsily boned!”

Bobo Spampinato was not going to be happy when he or his tetraploid muscle came to collect his fifty thousand. Cedric’s boss, Tom Fintzy, of Fintzy Beech and Bunshaft, Timebrokers, was not going to be receptive to another loan request, and in fact would quail at Cedric’s firm-tainting misbehavior, if he should learn of it. Cedric already owed a couple of year’s projected commissions to FB&B, loans taken out ostensibly to take advantage of some hot IPOs, and the boy-wonder timebroker had been indulged thus far only because of his past exceptional performance.

And Caresse. Caresse was going to be extremely disappointed in Cedric, to say the least, especially after financing her boyfriend’s most recent expensive course of therapy.

Cedric moaned loud enough for nearby patrons to hear him and gaze sympathetically or disapprovingly. He buried his head in his hands to escape their stares. The café in San Francisco’s North Beach neighborhood was not as packed as it would’ve been at midnight, when many people ate nocturne. But there was still a good-sized crowd of witnesses to Cedric’s despair and shame.

Noise from the happy, busy throngs on Columbus Avenue pulsed in as the café’s door opened and closed. People going to work, to clubs, to parks, to movies, to happy homes. Why couldn’t Cedric be one of them, moving easily through the brightly lit city at six bells in the midwatch? But he was isolated, because of his stupid gambling addiction.

The rumble of a small kibe’s wheels approaching caused Cedric to look up. Here came his meal. The kibe deposited the dish and drink before Cedric, then rolled off. The smell of the fish tacos made Cedric nauseous,

and he pushed the plate away. But he downed the beer in one long swallow and ordered another.

Going back to work drunk would hardly complicate his life any further, and might blunt the pain.

* * * *

The fourth generation of anti-somnolence drugs after Provigil, released in 2022, completely eliminated the need to sleep.

With the simple ingestion of a single daily pill, humanity was forever freed from the immemorial shackles of nightly unconsciousness.

As easily as that, people increased their effective lifespans by a third.

Dreaming and whatever function it fulfilled were pushed way down below liminal awareness. Scientists were not quite sure if such drugs as Eternalert, ZeroBlink, Carpenoct, and Sunshine Superman even permitted dreaming at any stratum of the mind’s operation. But in any case, no one seemed to suffer from the banishment of these ancient nightly hallucinations.

The issue of physical tiredness, the cyclical build-up of somatic fatigue poisons, was remedied by dietary nutraceuticals, intervals of sedentary activities and bouts of physical therapy.

In a few short years after the introduction of these drugs, enormous changes in global society were already institutionalized.

Developed countries who could afford the pricey proprietary drugs now operated on 24/7 time. (The poorer nations remained zones of sleep infiltrated by rich elites of the perpetually wakeful.) The vast majority of the citizens of America, for instance, made no distinction among any of the hours in any given 24-hour period. Work and play, study and travel, might occur at any time of the day. The old Navy system of watches and bells, suited for perpetual alertness, was commonly adopted. All the old distinctions between hours when the sun was up and the hours when it was down disappeared. Before too long, hyper-flextime reigned, with duties and pleasures being dynamically apportioned among the available hours.

Strange synergies of R&D began to accumulate, as single-minded researchers were able to doggedly follow paths of experimentation without downtime, and could coordinate their efforts globally without the impediments of operating in incompatible timezones. New products flooded forth at unprecedented rates.

But most importantly, time became fungible, a commodity to be traded.

And whenever there was something to be traded, brokers arose.

A timebroker mediated between individuals and institutions, citizens and the government. Individuals registered their shifting schedules hour by hour with a timebroker of their choice. During such and such hours, they would be willing to work; during other hours, they were interested in attending a concert, a ballgame, a university class, a gym. Contrarily, institutions registered their needs. The symphony wants a thousand listeners at 4 AM on Sunday. Can you provide them?

Institutions paid the timebrokers large fees for delivering guaranteed numbers of people—customers or workers or jury pools. Citizens received discounts on the face-value of tickets or tuition, or bonuses from employers, or tax-breaks from the state and federal governments, for being willing to commit blocks of time via their timebroker. Timebrokers lured institutional customers away from their competitors by exhibiting superior reliability and offering sliding fees. Individual citizens jumped from broker to broker based on whoever offered better incentives. Brokers could refuse to service individuals based on a record of non-compliance with promises.

Timebrokers operated globally, facilitating trade among all the hyperactive countries no longer in thrall to sleep.

In America, fifteen years after the release of fourth-generation a-som drugs and on the verge of seventh-generation versions, unemployment had effectively disappeared as the economy expanded by a third. Everyone who wanted a job had one. Timebrokers were especially in demand.

Except those unlucky enough to fall afoul of their own bad habits.

Like Cedric Swann.

* * * *

Bobo Spampinato and his goons came for Cedric during the dogwatch after the game. Cedric would have prefered, of course, to deal with the bookie at his home, a luxurious condo in the Presidio with killer views of the Golden Gate Bridge. In the privacy of his quarters, Cedric could have kept his indiscretions quiet, begged for mercy without shame, and generally made a pitiful spectacle of himself, thus possibly earning leniency. But perhaps knowing this, and being a man of no mercy, Bobo accosted Cedric at work.

“Mr. Swann, there are some, uh, people here to see you. They claim it’s about a debt of yours.” The voice of Cedric’s executive assistant, Delma Spicer, normally firm and assured, emerged from Cedric’s Palimpsest in quavering tones. Her pixie face, maculated with active tribal tags, gleamed with a sudden exudation of flopsweat.

Cedric looked frantically about his office for a miraculous exit he knew wasn’t there. Behind the framed Todd Schorr print? No such luck. At last he caved in. What else could he do? Time to take his medicine. How bad, after all, could it be?

“Send them in, Delma.”

Rising to his feet, Cedric managed to come around to the front of his work-surface just as Bobo and friends entered.

Bobo Spampinato was a scrawny, short Laotian man of boyish appearance. He had been adopted as an infant by a childless Italian couple. Bobo’s new father chanced to be responsible for half of the illegal gambling in California. Upon the old man’s death, Bobo took over the family business. He was normally quite busy directing matters at a high level, and a field call such as today’s was something of a perverse honor.

As usual, Bobo wore ErgoActive sandals, a pair of linen dress shorts and a tie-dye T-shirt whose living swirls reconfigured themselves stochastically based on a continuous feed of the Vegas line. His bowl-cut black hair fringed a pair of hard dark eyes. His unsmiling lips betokened the seriousness of the occasion. Despite the stylishness of his own fashionable suit, Cedric felt like a child next to Bobo’s informal, grim cool.

Bobo was flanked by his muscle: two enormous humans wearing only leather chest-harnesses and thongs, whose genome, judging by the browlines, hirsuteness and musculature on display, plainly included gorrilla snippets.

Cedric gulped. “Um, hello, Bobo. Good to see you. I was just going to call—”

“You owe me close to two hundred grand now, Swann. What are you going to do about it?”

“Well—pay it back, of course. Little by little—”

The larger of the gorilla-men grunted discontentedly, and Cedric wondered if they could even speak.

“Not good enough, Swann. I’m not a bank that makes loans. I need that money now. All of it.”

“But, Bobo, please, that’s impossible. I don’t have that kind of liquidity. My condo’s mortgaged to the hilt. Even if I sold everything I own, I couldn’t raise two hundred Gs.”

“That’s not quite true. I understand that your loving parents were quite generous when you graduated from college a few years ago. You have a forty-year a-som rider on your health insurance, all paid up.”

When fourth-generation anti-somnolence pills hit the marketplace, most health insurers refused to cover them, deeming them lifestyle drugs, choices, not necessary to combat any disease. But as the drugs became ubiquitous and essential for any full-fledged citizen to serve as a fully functioning member of society, the insurers relented to the extent of writing riders to their policies that would allow people to buy the drugs at a discount. A discount that still allowed immense profits for the pharmaceutical firms. Such clauses made the difference between being able to afford a-som and devoting half of one’s income just to maintaining wakefulness parity with the Joneses.

Cedric almost could not comprehend what Bobo was demanding. In hock already to his employer, there was no way Cedric could afford a-som payments out of his weekly salary without his insurance policy.

And without a-som, one might as well not exist.

Stuttering, Cedric said, “It—you—that’s unthinkable.”

“But obviously I am thinking about it, Swann. And you have about ten seconds to do the same.”

The smaller of the gorilla-men snorted through gaping nostrils while the other cracked knuckles the size of walnuts. Cedric blanched.

“Time’s up. What’ll it be, Swann?”

With shaking hands, Cedric used his Palimpsest to transfer his prepaid a-som coverage to Bobo.

Rolling up his own flatscreen with a satisfied grin, Bobo said, “That squares us, Swann. You know how to reach me for your next bet. But I’ll have to get any money up front from now on.”

Bobo and company departed. Cedric collapsed against his work-surface. But he was not permitted any time to collect his wits or assess his future.

Tom Fintzy, head of FB&B, offered a stern patrician mien to the world at the best of times. White-haired yet virile—his hair color a disarming cosmetic shuck, his virility the result of regular telomere maintenance and resveratrol patches—the chief timebroker had held many lucrative, high-status jobs prior to the a-som era: CEO of this and President of that. Cedric had heard all the boring tales endlessly. But upon coming out of early retirement, Fintzy had truly carved his niche in the timebroking field, showing a superior talent for collating huge masses of individuals with the needs of corporations, NGOs and government agencies. Now, standing in Cedric's office, Fintzy looked even more unforgiving and decisive than ever.

"Please pay attention, Cedric. I believe you know that according to your employment contract, our firm's freethinker is allowed to monitor your office space and all media traffic in and out of same."

Cedric's Palimpsest, still unrolled, now displayed the facial of FB&B's freethinker, an image of a smiling, grandmotherly matron.

"Hello, Mr. Swann," said the freethinker. "I'm afraid you've been a bit naughty."

"During the time you were entertaining your latest guests," Fintzy continued, "our freethinker deduced the illegal nature of your past activities, assembled proof of all your illicit transactions, including the records of the loans from FB&B you obtained under false pretenses, wrote a report on your case, synopsized it, outlined the range of recommended disciplinary actions and subsequent cost-benefit analysis, and submitted the whole to me. I have tried to act in a similar timely fashion. Mr. Swann, you will not be turned over to any law-enforcement agency by us, due to the embarrassing nature of your crimes and the way it would reflect poorly on the character of FB&B. However, your contract with us is hereby terminated and any future salary you might earn will be garnished by us until your loans are repaid. Moreover, you will have a black flag attached to your Universal CV. You have ten minutes to clear the building before security arrives."

Cedric, of course, could make no palliating reply to such a comprehensive and clearly stated case of malfeasance. Nor could he find it in himself to rage or bluster or revile. So he simply gathered the personal contents of his office—everything fit in a small trash basket—and left.

* * * *

Dressed in the living jelly slippers known as Gooey Gumshoes, her denim daisydukes revealing generous crescents of butt cheek, and a bandeau top straining across her ample chest, the attractive black woman carried what appeared to be a small shallow suitcase. She stepped into the living room of Cedric's condo and said, "Just a minute, honey, and I'll make you feel all better." She set the suitcase down in the middle of the open floorspace, stepped back and sent a command via her Palimpsest.

Cedric watched grimly from his seat on the couch. He doubted that anything could make him feel better.

Unfolding its cleverly hinged sections, extruding carbon-fiber struts, cantilevering, snicking together in lego-block fashion, tapping compressed air cylinders and flexing plastic muscles, the suitcase bloomed like a newborn foal struggling to its legs. In under thirty seconds, a padded massage table—fairy-like, but capable of supporting the heaviest client—stood waist-high where the suitcase had rested.

"Oh, no, Caresse, I'm not in any mood for a massage—"

Caresse Gadbois advanced toward the professional stage where she relieved the daily somatic tensions of her eternally on-the-go clientele—in a resolutely non-sexual manner. Licensed and bonded, Caresse had attended school for two years and apprenticed for an equal period before establishing her own practice. She was one of tens of thousands of traveling masseuses who helped the a-som society function.

"The hell with that shit, boyfriend! That's your toxins talking. I don't know what's bothering you, but whatever it is, it won't seem quite so bad after a massage. Strip, pal, and get on the table. What's the point of having a masseuse for a girlfriend if you can't get a nice backrub for free anytime you need one?"

Caresse's mildly accented voice—her family hailed from Haiti, having legally emigrated to America during Caresse's youth, when their island nation became a USA protectorate—worked its usual voodoo magic on Cedric. He undressed down to his boxers as Caresse removed various lotions and balms from her large professional satchel.

On the table, Cedric relaxed under Caresse's expert touch. His consciousness descended a notch, into that slightly hypnagogic microsleep which scientists theorized helped to permit continuous awareness. Still able

to maintain an undemanding conversation, Cedric listened to an account of Caresse's day, the various people she had helped, interjecting suitable affirmatory comments at regular intervals.

Admittedly, Caresse's ministrations did help to relieve some of the tension in Cedric's frame. When she had finished, he arose from the table feeling that perhaps he was not totally doomed after all. As he dressed, while Caresse convinced her massage table to resume its suitcase disguise, he said, "Caresse, honey, I have something to tell you. Unfortunately, it's pretty bad news."

Caresse's typically cheerful attitude dissolved in a sober frown. "What is it, Cedric? You're not sick, are you?"

Cedric winced at Caresse's genuine concern. Her first thought had been for his health. What a selfish jerk he had been—still was! Telling her the truth would not be easy. Might as well just plow painfully ahead.

Sitting on the couch with Caresse, Cedric revealed everything, from his final unwise wager on the Giants—damn their shitty playing!—through the surrender of his a-som coverage to Bobo, down to his firing and black-flagging.

When he had finished, Caresse said nothing for an excruciating time. Then she said, "The therapy didn't take then. I just threw my money away on quacks. I'm lodging a complaint—!"

Cedric hung his head. "No, Caresse, don't. I was on trope-agonists the whole time I was at the clinic. I smuggled them in. Caresse—I just couldn't bring myself to give up gambling! But I've hit bottom now. Really, I have! I'm lower than coffee futures. Honest!"

Silence. Cedric focused on his palms folded in his lap, waiting for Caresse to render judgment on him, experiencing each second as a hellish eternity. He stole a glance at her face, and saw that she was silently crying. He felt like shit.

At last she said, "I was right. You were sick. Really sick. Your addiction was totally stronger than you could deal with. But if you think you've changed now—"

"I am, I am! Totally changed!"

"Well, then, I guess I can forgive you."

Now they were both crying. Through the tears, they kissed, and the kissing soon passed into more frenetic activity, utilizing the substantial

couch as platform. There was no bedroom to retreat to. People didn't have bedrooms any longer. They had a variety of couches and recliners used for relaxing. This furniture supported sex as well. If someone was a real hedonist, they might have a room devoted just to screwing, but such an excess was generally thought declasse. Most people happily used their ex-bedrooms for media centers or home offices or rec rooms, gaining extra functional apartment space at no additional cost.

At one point early on in the lovemaking, Caresse kicked off her Gooey Gumshoes and the footware obediently humped themselves across the floor and out of the way beneath the couch, moving like certain ambulatory mycotic ancestors.

The makeup sex was spectacular. But Cedric emerged depressed anyhow. The full consequences of his fall now weighed heavily on him. Cuddling Caresse, he generously shared his anxiety with her.

"I'm going to have to give up this place. I'll lose all my equity. Not that it's much. And I've only got a little more than a week's worth of a-som on hand. I would have to get fired right near the end of the month! So I'll have to find a job right away. But I can't work as a timebroker. Fintzy's fucking black flag sees to that! But I don't have any experience that would bag me a job that pays as much. And with the garnish on any future salary, how am I going to make ends meet? It looks like I'm going to have to choose between becoming homeless, or becoming a—a sleeper!"

Cedric waited for Caresse to offer him an invitation to live with her. But he waited in vain. Had he pushed her affection and charity too far? When she finally spoke, her comment was noncommital and only vaguely comforting.

"Don't worry, Cedric, it'll all work out."

Cedric tried to be macho about his plight. But his fear leaked out.

"Right, sure, it all will. But I'm just a little scared, is all."

* * * *

Like most of the developed, a-som world, the United States of America now boasted a birth-rate which fell well below replacement levels, the culmination of longterm historical trends that had begun a century ago, and which a-som tech had only accelerated. Had immigration not kept the

melting pot full, the country would have become radically depopulated in a few generations.

Children could not take anti-somnolence drugs until puberty, a condition which nowadays statistically occured on the average around age twelve. Their juvenile neurological development required sleep, periods in which the maturing brain bootstrapped itself into its final state. This process had proven to be one of the few vital, irreplaceable functions of sleep. (And even if infants and toddlers had been able to take a-som drugs, no sane parent would have wanted them awake 24/7.)

Consequently, parenting had acquired another massive disincentive. The hours when children had to sleep had formerly been shared by their parents in the same unconscious state. No particular sacrifice had been required on the part of the adults. But now, staying home with archaically dormant children constituted cruel and unusual punishment, robbing adults of all the possibilities that a-som opened up. More than ever, adults concerned with careers or intent on socializing and indulging their interests regarded child-raising as a jail term.

The child-care industry had adapted and boomed in response. Battalions of nannies specializing in the guardianship of sleeping children now circulated throughout the country, supporting the flexible lifestyles of absent mothers and fathers. Amateur babysitters had gone the way of paperboys. But the job, while essential, was still regarded as unskilled labor. The low pay for babysitting reflected this classification.

Sinking down through the vocation-sphere, the black flag on his UCV denying him employment everywhere he turned, Cedric Swann had finally found employment as one of these rugrat guardians.

Ironically, the intermediary between Cedric and his employer, TotWatch, Inc., were the timebrokers Fintzy Beech and Bunshaft. Cedric had reluctantly continued his registration with his ex-employer, acknowledging that FB&B did offer the best deals. And apparently, the firm’s ire at Cedric did not impede its greed for another warm body to meet the quotas of its clients—if any client would have him.

Desperate for money, Cedric had specified an open-ended availability as a nanny. Children were asleep at all bells of all watches. Their schooling was just as freeform as their parents’ lives. Class time—a small fraction of total

learning hours disbursed across various modalities of instruction—was brokered out to public and private schools that operated around the clock.

Today, Cedric had a gig over in his old neighborhood. The contrast with his own new residence couldn't have been greater, and the irony was not lost on him.

After selling his condo and most of his furniture and possessions, Cedric had found a cheap apartment in Chinatown, above a dank, smelly business that biocultured shark fins for the restaurant trade. Now all his clothes smelled of brine and exotic nutrient feedstuffs, and his view was not of the Golden Gate Bridge, but rather the facade of a martial-arts academy, where a giant hardlight sign endlessly illustrated deadly drunken-master moves.

As for his a-som doses, Cedric had managed to stay supplied. But only by abandoning the brand-name sixth-generation pills he had been taking and switching to a generic fifth-generation prescription. The lesser drugs maintained his awareness fairly well. At least he couldn't detect any changes in his diurnal/nocturnal consciousness; but then again, that was like trying to measure a potentially warped ruler with itself. Although occasionally his limbs did feel as if they were wrapped in cotton batting, and his tongue would stick to the roof of his mouth.

Leaving his apartment at first bell of the first watch, Cedric used his Palimpsest to find the location of the nearest Yellow Car. One of the ubiquitous miniature rental buggies was parked just a block away, and Cedric was grateful for small miracles. He could have taken a crosstown bus, or even have walked to save money, but he felt that his spirits would benefit from a small indulgence.

Cedric missed so many things that had vanished from his life. Naturally he missed his luxurious home and lifestyle. The sensations engendered by those material losses had been expected. But more surprisingly, Cedric missed being a timebroker, the buzz he had gotten from collating supply and demand, from filling a San Diego trope-fab with eager workers or making the San Jose Burning Man a success. Now he felt powerless, isolated, unproductive. Watching sleeping larvae! How had he fallen so far?

But if not for Caresse's continued affection and support, Cedric would've have felt a lot worse. Having her as his girlfriend had been his mainstay. Caresse continually reminded him that the black flag on his UCV would expire at the end of five years or at the repayment of all his debts,

whichever came first, and that all he had to do was stick it out that long. Her optimistic outlook was invaluable. And the free bodyrubs and sex didn't hurt either. They were supposed to hook up after Cedric's gig later, in fact, and Cedric was counting the minutes till then.

Climbing into the Yellow Car, Cedric started it with his Palimpsest. He noticed with irritation the low-fuel reading on the car's tank, due to an inconsiderate prior driver, and swore at the necessity for stopping at a refueling station. But then again, he could top off his Palimpsest with butane as well.

The dusk-tinged streets of San Francisco on this lovely late-spring evening were moderately thronged with busy citizens. There were no such phenomena as "rush hours" or "off-hours" any longer. The unsynchronized mass impulses of the citizenry, mediated by the timebrokers, resulted in a statistically even distribution of activity across all watches. No longer did one find long queues at restaurants at "dinner time" or lines at the DMV. With every hour interchangeable, and everything functioning continuously, humanity had finally been freed from the tyranny of the clock.

After hitting the pumps, Cedric made good time to his destination. The large glass-walled house where Cedric was to babysit commanded a fine view of the Bay, and Cedric felt a flare of jealousy and regret.

Alex and Brian Holland-Nancarrow greeted Cedric pleasantly. Both of the slim, moddishly accoutred men shared an expensively groomed appearance that bespoke plenty of surplus cash—as if the house weren't proof enough of that.

"We're in a bit of a hurry, Cedric. But let us show you a few things you'll need while you're here. As you know from TotWatch, we have two children, Xiomara and Tupac. They're both asleep already. Here's their bedroom."

Reverently, the fathers opened the bedroom door a crack to allow Cedric to peer within. The unnaturally darkened chamber, the smell of children's breath and farts, the sound of coma-like breathing —these all induced in Cedric a faint but distinct nausea. It was like looking into a morgue or zombie nest, or a monkey cage at the midnight zoo. He could barely recall his own youthful sleeping habits, and the prospect of ever sleeping himself again made him want to vomit.

“We have a security kibe, and you’ll have to give it a cell sample. Just put your finger there—perfect! We’re heading up to a wine-tasting in Sonoma, and we should be back by four bells of the midwatch. Feel free to have nocturne with whatever you find in the fridge. There’s some really superior pesto we just whipped up, and baby red potatoes already boiled.”

“Fine, thanks, have a great time.”

The Holland-Nancarrows departed in a crimson Wuhan Peony, and Cedric thumbed his nose at them once they were safely out of sight.

Back inside, he looked for ways to amuse himself. He watched a few minutes of a Giants game on his Palimpsest, but the experience was boring when he didn’t have any money riding on the contest. He prolonged the meditative drinking of a single boutique beer from the house’s copious stock, but eventually the bottle gurgled its last. He made a dutiful trip to the bedroom and witnessed the children—shadowy lumps—sleeping as monotonously as before. Cedric shuddered.

Eventually, Cedric found himself poking around the family flatscreen. The display device occupied a whole wall, and somehow even vapid entertainment was more entrancing at that size.

And that’s when he found that the Holland-Nancarrows had departed so hurriedly that they had left their system wide open. They had never logged off.

After hesitating a moment, Cedric decided to go exploring. He paged through their mail, but discovered only bland trivia about people he didn’t know. He discovered what Alex and Brian did for a living: they designed facials for freethinkers. In effect, they were cyber-beauticians.

Then Cedric stumbled across a bookmark for a Cuban casino. Apparently, his hosts had recently placed a few amateur bets.

Cedric hesitated. In the pit of his stomach and down to his loins, a familiar beast was awaking and growling and stretching its limbs.

Just a small visit, to taste the excitement. He could lurk without playing.

Yeah. And the Mars colony would find life someday.

Under Cedric’s touch, the screen filled with a first-person-shooter image of the casino floor. Cedric was telefactoring a kibe, whose manipulators would emerge into his field of vision when he reached for something. Cedric wheeled the kibe toward the blackjack tables, his favorite game.

Cedric started betting small at first. The wagers came, of course, from the cyber-purse of the Holland-Nancarrows. If he drained the purse of too much money, they'd spot the loss and track down the bets to a time when they weren't home. But if he won, he'd leave the purse at its original value and transfer the excess to his own pockets. They'd never have occasion to check.

And of course, he would win. And win big!

The hours sped by as Cedric played with feverish intensity. His skills had not left him, and he was really in the zone. The cards favored him as well. Lady Luck had her hands down his pants. Pretty soon, he had racked up ten thousand dollars of the casino's money. Only a drop toward lifting his debts, but certainly the best-paying babysitting gig he had ever had.

Cedric left the casino and squirted the funds to his account. No one would ever be the wiser.

He was opening a second celebratory beer when the police arrived.

"Cedric Swann, we have a warrant for your arrest. Please come with us."

"But—but I didn't do anything—"

"The Holland-Nancarrow freethinker swears otherwise."

On the big wallscreen appeared the facial of the house's freethinker: an image of ex-President Streisand. "That's the man, officers."

The house's freethinker! But who would set a freethinker to monitor legitimate transactions originating in-house?

Paranoid parents, obviously.

Who the hell could think as deviously as a breeder?

* * * *

Cedric's possessions now amounted to a single scuffed biomer suitcase of clothing and his Palimpsest. Cedric and his suitcase called a single room in a flophouse in the Mission District their home. The flophouse was a rhizome-diatom hybrid, taking form as a soil-rooted silicaceous warren of chambers, threaded with arteries and nerves that served in place of utilities, all grown in place on a large lot where several older structures had stood until a terrorist attack demolished them. The site had been officially decontaminated, but Cedric wasn't sure he believed that. Why had no one snapped up the valuable midtown real estate, leaving the lot for such a low-rent usage? In any case, Cedric felt like a bacteria living inside a sponge.

He supposed that such a lowly status was merely consonant with society's regard for him, after his latest fuckup.

Instead of meeting Caresse at a restaurant as they had planned, Cedric met her on the night of his arrest at the jailhouse where he had been taken by the cops. She came to bail him out, and he accepted her charity wordlessly, realizing there was nothing he could say to exculpate himself. He had been caught red-handed while submitting to his implacable vice.

Caresse had been silent also, except for formalities with the police. Cedric fully expected her to explode with anger and recriminations when he got into her car. But the calm disdain she unloaded on him was even more painful.

"You obviously have no regard for yourself, and none for me. I've tried to be understanding, Cedric, really, I have. I don't think any woman could have cut you more slack, or tried harder to help you reform. But this is the absolute end. I've put up your bail money so that you could be free to plan your defense—as if you have any—and so that you wouldn't have to be humiliated by being in prison. But that's the end of the road for you and me. I can't have anything else to do with you in the future. Whatever existed between us is gone, thanks to your weak-willed selfishness."

Cedric looked imploringly at Caresse's beautiful profile with its gracefully sculpted jawline. She did not turn to spare him a glance, but kept her eyes resolutely on the busy midnight city street. He knew then that he had truly lost her forever, realized he had never fully appreciated her love. But he had neither the energy nor hope to contest her death sentence on their relationship.

"I'm sorry, Caresse. I never meant to hurt you. Can you drop me off at my place?"

"Of course. I've got just enough time before my yoga class."

The Holland-Nancarrows declined to press for any jail-time for Cedric, considering that they had not actually lost any money, nor had their precious children been harmed by the bad man. (The casino took back Cedric's winnings on the basis of identity misrepresentation by the player.) But that did not stop the judge hearing Cedric's case from imposing on Cedric a huge fine and five years' probation. Cedric's own court-appointed freethinker lawyer had not been receptive to the notion of an appeal.

Worst of all the repercussions of his crime, however, was that Cedric was double black-flagged, denied employment even as a nanny.

He had no choice but to go on welfare.

The welfare rolls of the sleeplessly booming USA economy had been pared to historic lows. Only the most vocationally intransigent or helpless indigents lived off the government dole.

And now Cedric was one of this caste. Unclean. Unseen.

And a sleeper as well. A living atavism.

The dole didn't cover a-som drugs. Not even the fourth-generation, expired-shelf-date stuff shipped to Third World countries.

Being a sleeper was hell. It wasn't that sleepers were persecuted against, legally or in a covert manner. Nor were they held in contempt. No, sleepers were just simply ignored by the unsleeping. They were deemed irrelevant because they couldn't keep up. They were living their lives a third slower than the general populace. After a night's unconsciousness, a sleeper would awake to discover that he had a new congressional representative, or that the clothes he had worn yesterday were outmoded. New buzzwords were minted while he slept, new celebrities crowned, new political crises defused. The changes were not always so radical, but even on a slow Tuesday night they were incremental. Day by day, sleepers fell further and further behind the wavefront of the culture, until at last they were living fossils.

Cedric could hardly believe that such was now his fate.

After his sentencing and his removal to the flophouse, once he had consumed the last of his a-som scrip, Cedric had managed to stay desperately awake for a little over forty-eight hours, thanks to massive coffee intake, some Mexican amphetamines purchased on a street corner, and a cheap kibe massage that left him reeking of machine lubricant from a leaky gasket on the kibe.

The ancient sensations flooding his mind and body exerted at first a kind of grim and perverse fascination. The whole experience was like watching the tide reclaim a sand castle. Sitting in his tiny room, on an actual bed, he monitored his helpless degeneration. His concentration wavered and faded, his limbs grew unwieldy, his speech confused. Despite raging against his loss, Cedric ultimately had no choice but to succumb.

And then he dreamed.

He had forgotten dreaming, the nightly activity of his childhood.

Forgotten that some dreams were nightmares.

He awoke from that initial sleep shaking and drenched with sweat, the night terrors mercifully fading from memory. He retained only vague images of teeth and crushing weights, falling through space and scrabbling for handholds.

Cedric got up from bed, dressed and went out into the streets.

Kibes running errands or patrolling for lawbreakers mingled with the many humans. The Mission District was not populated entirely by charity-case sleepers. Many of the people on the street were citizens in fine standing. Here was a colorful clique of tawny Polynesian immigrants, adapting to life away from their sea-swamped island homes. Their happy, bright-eyed faces seemed to mock him. From Cedric's new vantage point down in the underbelly of the a-som society, everyone looked wired and jazzed up, restlessly active, spinning their wheels in a perpetual drag race toward an ever-receding finish line.

But having this vision didn't mean he still wouldn't rejoin his ex-peers in a second.

Cedric was convinced that everyone could smell the sleep-stench rising from him, spot his saggy eyelids from a block away. Eating in a cheap diner that allowed him to stretch his monthly money as far as possible, Cedric resolved to kill himself rather than go on like this.

But he didn't. In a week, a month, he re-learned how to function with a third of his life stolen by sleep, and became resigned to an indefinitely prolonged future of this vapid existence.

As role models for his new lifestyle, Cedric had the other inhabitants of his flophouse. He had expected his fellow sleepers to be vicious father-rapers or congenitally brain-damaged droolers or polycaine addicts. But to Cedric's surprise, his fellow sleepers represented a wide range of intelligence and character, as extensive a spectrum of personalities as could be found anywhere else. In the short and desultory conversations Cedric allowed himself with them, he learned that some were deliberate holdouts against the a-som culture, while some were ex-members of the majority, like Cedric himself, professionals who had somehow lost their hold on the a-som pinnacle.

And then you had Doug Clearmountain.

Doug was the happiest person Cedric had ever met. Short, rugged, bald-crowned but with a fringe of long hair, Doug resembled a time-battered troll of indeterminate years.

The first time Doug made contact with Cedric, in the grotto-like lobby of the flophouse, the older man introduced himself by saying, “Hey there, chum, I’m Morpheus. You want the red pill or the blue?”

“Huh?”

“Not a film buff, I see. Doug Clearmountain. And you are?”

“Cedric Swann.”

“Cedric, it’s a pleasure to meet you. Let’s grab a coffee.”

“Uh, sure.”

Over coffee Cedric learned that, before settling in San Francisco, Doug had been an elder of a religious community that featured, among other tenets of its creed, the renunciation of a-som drugs. The community—a syncretic mix of Sufism, Theravada Buddhism and TM—had struggled in the wilds of Oregon for approximately fifteen years before bleeding away all its members to the siren call of 24/7 wakefulness. Doug had been the last adherent to remain. Then one day, when he finally admitted no one was coming back, he just walked away from the empty community.

“Decided it was time to do a little preaching amidst the unconverted.”

Cedric took a swig of coffee, desperate to wake up, to dispel the funk engendered by his nightly bad dreams. “Uh, yeah, how’s that working for you? You convinced many people to nod out?”

Undaunted by Cedric’s evident disinterest, Doug radiated a serene confidence. “Not at all. Haven’t made one convert yet. But I’ve found something even more important to keep me busy.”

The coffee was giving Cedric a headache. A tic was tugging at the corner of his right eye. He had no patience for any messianic guff from this loony. “Sure, right, I bet you’re really busy working to engineer a rebellion that nobody in their right mind wants. Down with the timebrokers, right?”

“Hardly, Cedric, hardly. I’m actually doing essential work helping to prop our incessant society up. It can’t survive much longer on its own, you know. It’s like a spinning flywheel without a brake. But this is the course that the bulk of our species has chosen, so me and some others are just trying to shepherd them through it. But I can see that you have no interest in hearing

about my mission at the moment. You're too busy adjusting to your new life. We'll talk more when you're ready."

Doug Clearmountain left then, having paid for both their coffees.

At least the nut wasn't a cheapskate.

For the most part, Cedric resisted the impulse to reconnect with his old life, the glamorous satisfying round of timebrokering, gambling and leisure pursuits. He spent his time giving mandatory Palimpsest interviews to his freethinker probation officer (whose federally approved facial was that of a sweater-wearing kiddie-show host who had retired before Cedric was born). He roamed the hilly streets of the city, seeking to exhaust his body and hopefully gain a solid night's sleep. (Useless. The nightmares persisted.) He watched sports. He tried to calculate how long it would be before all his debts were paid off with the court-mandated pittance being deducted from his welfare stipend. (Approximately eleven hundred years.)

Once he tried to get in touch with Caresse. She couldn't talk because she was in the middle of a massage, but she promised to call back.

She actually did.

But Cedric was asleep.

He took that as a sign not to try again.

Six months passed, and Cedric resembled a haunted, scarecrow model of his old self.

That's when Doug Clearmountain approached him again, jovial and optimistic as ever.

"Congratulations on the fine job you're doing, Cedric."

Cedric had taken to hanging out at Fisherman's Wharf, cadging spare change from the tourists via Palimpsest transactions. He was surprised to see Doug here when he raised his dirty bearded face up from contemplating the ground.

"Go fuck yourself."

Doug remained unfazed. "I'm not being sarcastic, son. I was just congratulating you on half a year as a sleeper. Do you realize how much of our planet's finite resources you've saved?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're using a third less energy, a third less food than your erstwhile compatriots. I'm sure Gaia appreciates your sacrifice. When the a-som society came fully online globally, it was like adding another America to

the planetary eco-burden. Ouch! Despite all the fancy new inventions, our planet is heading toward catastrophe faster than ever. All we're doing lately is staving off the inevitable."

"Big whoop. So I'm a tiny positive line-item in the carbon budget."

"Well, yes, your sacrifice is negligible, regarded in that light. But there's another way you can be of more help. And that's by dreaming."

Cedric shuddered. "Dreams! Don't say that word to me. I haven't had a pleasant dream since I went cold turkey."

Doug's perpetual grin gave way to a look of sober concern. "I know that, Cedric. That's because you're not doing it right. You're trying to go it alone. Would you like some help with your dreams?"

"What've you got? A-som? How much?"

"No, not a-som. Something better. Why not come with me and see for yourself?"

What did Cedric have to lose? He let Doug lead him away.

The authorities had marked the small waterfront building for eventual demolition, as they continually enhanced the system of dikes protecting the city's shoreline from rising sea levels. For now, though, the structure was still high and dry. Doug pried back a suspiciously hinged panel of plywood covering a doorframe and conducted Cedric inside.

The place smelled like chocolate. Perhaps the Ghiaradelli company had once stored product here. But now the the large open twilit room was full of sleepers. Arrayed on obsolete military cots, two dozen men and women, covered by blankets, snored peacefully while wired cranially to a central machine the size of a dorm fridge.

"What—what the hell is this? What's going on?"

"This is a little project I and my friends like to call 'Manhole 69.' Ring any bells? No? Ah, a shame, the lack of classical education you youngsters receive. Well, no matter. The apparatus you see is a REM-sleep modulator. Invented shortly before the introduction of a-som tech, and then abandoned. Ironically unusable by the very people who needed it the most. Basically, this device provides guided dream experiences within broad parameters. The individual's creativity is shaped into desired forms. Non-surgical neuronal magnetic induction, and all that. Everyone you see here, Cedric, is dreaming of a better world. Here, take a look."

Doug borrowed Cedric's Palimpest and called up a control channel to the dream machine. A host of windows filled the flatscreen. Cedric witnessed pastoral landscapes populated by shining godlings, super-science metropoli, alien worlds receiving human visitors, and other fanciful scenes.

"Are you totally demented, man? So you can give people pretty dreams. So what? Don't get me wrong, I'll take a few hours under your brain probe, just to get some relief. But as far as helping the world become a better place, you're only kidding yourself."

"Oh, really? Would you care to discuss this over some coffee?"

"Coffee? What're you talking about?"

Doug didn't answer. He was too busy sending instructions to the dream machine. All the flatscreen windows formerly revealing the variegated dreams of the sleepers changed at once to the same realtime image: the interior of the very building Cedric and Doug stood in, captured by Palimpsest cam. But the screen-views held a difference from reality: a steaming paper cup stood atop the dream machine cabinet.

"This should only take a second or two."

"What should take—"

Cedric smelled the coffee before he saw it. There it rested, just where the dreamers had envisioned it.

Cedric walked in a daze to the cabinet, picked the coffee up. The cup and its contents warmed his fingers.

Doug's manner altered to the serious affect of an expert in his field with something to sell.

"Two dozen people programmed to dream the same thing can instantiate objects massing up to ten ounces. I expect that the phenomenon scales up predictably. Something to do with altering probabilities and shifting our quantum selves onto alternate timelines, rather than producing matter ex nihilo. Or so certain sleeper scientists among us theorize. But we're not interested in such parlor tricks. Instead, we want to shallowly engrave a variety of desirable futures into our local brane, thereby increasing the likelihood that one of them will become real. We're shifting the rails that society is following. And as Thoreau once ironically observed, rails rest on sleepers. There are places like this around the globe, Cedric. And the more sleepers we enlist, the greater our chances of success. Are you onboard, son?"

Cedric regarded Doug dubiously. Had the manifestation of the coffee been a trick? Maybe that cabinet was hollow, with a false top, the coffee concealed inside. Should he ask for another demonstration, or take the old man on faith? Why would anyone bother to try to hoax him into simply going to sleep? And what else was he going to do with his life?

"Here," said Cedric, offering the coffee to Doug. "You take this.

"I guess I'm finally ready for a little shuteye."

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Editor Lou Anders, who commissioned this piece, has a knack for bringing out the best in me, it seems. His various original anthologies are conceptualized so clearly, and feature such intriguing conceits, that I'm inspired to go all out, creating universes that are a little more complex than I might normally strive to create at this short-story level.

Anyone who's ever tried to keep up with our hectic 24/7/365 culture should be able to relate to this story—which also draws inspirations from R. A. Lafferty's classic "Slow Tuesday Night."

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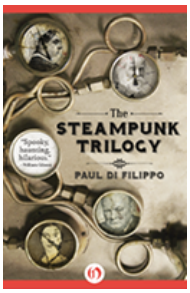
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